***Cherchez la femme*: Absence and Hysteria in *Cet obscur objet du désir* (Buñuel, 1977) *La piel que habito* (Almodóvar, 2011) and *Caótica Ana* (Medem, 2007)**

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I, Octavia Bright, confirm that the work presented in this thesis is my own. Where information has been derived from other sources, I confirm that this has been indicated in the thesis.

ABSTRACT:

This thesis provides close analysis of three films by Spain's most notable auteur directors, all of which represent idealised femininity as an impossible desire, governed simultaneously by lack and excess. It explores the relationship between idealised femininity and male hysteria represented by narrative trajectories that are one way or another launched by a masculinity in crisis (on- or off-screen).

Building on theoretical analysis in the field by Rob Stone, Julián Gutierrez-Albilla, Paul Julian Smith, Linda Williams, and others, and using a psychoanalytical framework informed by thinkers including Lacan, Kristeva, Irigaray and Deleuze and Guattari, it expands on prior interpretations of these films by exploring them alongside the work of artist Louise Bourgeois (referenced directly in Almodóvar's *mise-en-scène*), whose oeuvre, like that of these three directors, explores the limits of desire and identity.

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Chapter One: Introducing the Arch of Hysteria

Figure 1: *Arch of Hysteria,* Louise Bourgeois (1993).

From the *Venus de Milo* (130-100 BC) to the present day, Western culture has obsessively returned to representations of the idealised female body, and the relationship of the female body to the male gaze remains as fraught today as it did when Laura Mulvey first identified man as maker and woman as bearer of meaning (1999: 834).[1] Pedro Almodóvar knowingly critiques the sexed and gendered dialectic of this gaze when he opens *La piel que habito* (2011) with an explicit visual reference to Louise Bourgeois' bronze sculpture, *Arch of Hysteria* (1993) [Fig. 1] and this thesis pursues the connection made in this image between the naked human body and hysteria. The 19th century neurologist Jean-Martin Charcot (1825-1893) was hysteria's most famous proponent, and Bourgeois' vision of the hysterical *arc-en-cercle* is directly informed by the drawings and photographs he used to document his

[1] See Mulvey (1999).

research at the infamous Salpêtrière hospital in Paris [Fig. 2].[2] Her sculpture, however, subverts the conventional framing of hysteria as a female disorder by presenting a headless, sexually ambiguous figure with recognisably masculine attributes, in a pose more commonly associated with the cultural representation of women. The piece simultaneously turns an image equated with madness, voyeurism, and medical curiosity into a beautiful *objet d'art*, and encourages from the viewer a different sort of contemplation and interaction. Hanging suspended in space, vulnerable and delicate, the golden surface of this androgynous body emphasises the value implicitly placed on the traditionally female object of the gaze.[3] Bent into an exaggerated backwards arch, its unnatural torsion conveys the extreme nature of this state that here, quite literally, lifts the sufferer out of quotidian experience, while its inherent duality implicitly transgresses conventional gender roles: it 'capture[s] the association with both genders in one image – the two-in-one of bisexuality' (Mitchell 2014: 11).[4]

Figure 2: From Charcot's *Iconographie photographique de la Salpêtrière* (1878).

[2] Juliet Mitchell also notes that: 'Through her art […], Bourgeois transformed the hysterical aspects of her personality into an understanding and representation of hysteria' (2014: 11).
[3] Interestingly, Charcot himself had planned to become an artist, and actually sold images of his patients at the Salpêtrière (Showalter 1997: 31).
[4] Mitchell uses the term 'bisexual' as does Freud, to describe 'our identity as sexual subjects' rather as a reference to sexual orientation (2014: 11).

Following the template set by Charcot and his patients/models at the Salpêtrière and intrinsically connected to the topics of vision and desire, hysteria is historically configured as the interaction between the medical man and his contorted female subject. An enduring enigma, the condition remains a source of fascination for doctors and artists alike, for although it has occupied space in the cultural unconscious since antiquity (when it was considered an exclusively female disorder caused by the so-called 'wandering womb'), it remains a problem to be 'solved'. For Elaine Showalter this lack of resolution is part of the reason the condition remains so compelling:

> Social historians, philosophers, anthropologists, literary critics, and art historians have taken up the subject of hysteria because it cuts across historical periods and national boundaries, poses fundamental questions about gender and culture, and offers insights into language, narrative, and representation (1997: 7).

In his in-depth study of Charcot's research, Georges Didi-Huberman explains that 'the hysteric, constrained to exist only as the actress of her symptoms, simultaneously becomes *ideal and martyr*' (2003: 255) [Fig. 2]. Historically bound to notions of suffering, performance and visibility, the hysteric emerges out of a dialectical relationship between the active male doctor in control of the gaze, and the female patient as its passive recipient, who is cast simultaneously as the idealised object of desire and object of medical curiosity. Historical studies of hysteria tend therefore to expose a deep-seated mistrust of the female patients, who are often described as 'actresses' and 'performers' in literature about the condition (De Bustos, Galli, Haffen, and Moulin 2014: 30).

Figure 3: *Une leçon clinique à la Salpêtrière*, Pierre Aristide André Brouillet (1887).

This thesis will examine the way that Almodóvar and Julio Medem reference the hysterical *arc-en-cercle* in *mises-en-scène* that configure the (coded) female body as an object of both scopophilic pleasure and medical curiosity, mimicking Charcot and his female patients. It will also explore the historical connection with feminine monstrosity that makes hysteria doubly relevant to this discussion of three films: *Cet obscur objet du désir* (Buñuel, 1977), *La piel que habito* (Almodóvar, 2011), and *Caótica Ana* (Medem, 2007).[5] These films all present idealised femininity as fundamentally unstable.[6] They feature intentionally multiple female protagonists, whose connection to violence is both personal and structural/political. Each film offers the viewer a vision of woman as a fragmented or bisected object of desire that is abject and elusive – an archetypal projection used to fill the absence referred to in Lacanian notions of woman as *objet a,* or woman-as-lack. These films portray the battle of the sexes as fundamental, eternal, and founded in a masculine

[5] Henceforth referred to as *Cet obscur objet*, *La piel*, and *Ana* respectively.
[6] 'The symptoms of hysteria have also long been ascribed to "demonic possession and witchcraft". From the fall of the Roman Empire to the Enlightenment, many illnesses and cures were attributed to sorcery, witchcraft, and saints, and little distinction was made between medical, neurological, and psychological disorders' (J. M. S. Pearce 2014: 2).

desire to possess an elusive feminine counterpart that is presented as inherently duplicitous and inconsistent.[7] All of these films represent the feminine ideal as an impossible desire, governed simultaneously by lack and excess.[8]

Almodóvar's *La piel* explicitly references both Luis Buñuel and Bourgeois: the establishing shot of Toledo is an homage to the great surrealist and counterpart to that of *Tristana* (1970), made forty-one years earlier. Minutes later, we are introduced to the protagonist bent into a yoga pose that is a direct quotation of Bourgeois' *Arch of Hysteria*. These two explicit references inspired the research questions that motivate this thesis and its intention to re-examine the work of these directors through the lens of Bourgeois.[9] It uses the work of this fascinating female artist to explore the unusual representation of Conchita in *Cet obscur objet*, who is played by two actresses, Angela Molina and Carole Bouquet.[10] Although stylistically different, both Buñuel and Almodóvar have created films that raise questions about agency; both portray (apparently) female leads that have, in varying ways, two faces and one body; both present us with (apparently) female bodies that suffer violence onscreen. Medem's *Ana* covers the same territory: his eponymous protagonist is also characterized by a multiplicity that renders her 'chaotic'. She embodies the reincarnated spirits of a litany of young women throughout history who died as a result of male violence. Just as Almodóvar uses

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[7] Didi-Huberman underlines 'puppet-master' Charcot's power: 'The ability to reproduce all the states and postures of a body-machine; the ability to finally "possess" them, "producing" a whole theory; the ability to invent and always have one's theory confirmed by the facts: this was a sublime discovery. Hypnosis was Charcot's grand *style.* — Glances, subtle touches: powers' (2003: 187).

[8] E. Ann Kaplan explains this well when discussing the onscreen woman as 'the recipient of male desire, passively appearing rather than acting. Her sexual pleasure in this position can thus be constructed only around her own objectification' (1983: 26).

[9] See Sally Faulkner (2004) for a discussion of feminine monstrosity in *Tristana*.

[10] In the interests of continuity and clarity, I will use the word 'actress' to refer to Molina, Bouquet and other female actors, in spite of the potentially pejorative connotations, as it might be confusing to discuss these films in a way that focuses specifically on their representation of sex and gender using the term 'actor' for both male and female performers.

Bourgeois to reflect on the identity, body, and agency of the on-screen female, it is my aim to expand existing studies of these three films by staging their interaction with other visual texts, and by extending this line of enquiry (about male directors, women and the hysterical *arc en cercle*) to encompass Almodóvar's postmodern successor (Medem) as well as his surrealist predecessor (Buñuel). Appropriating its central 'staged' interaction from Almodóvar, this thesis will examine whether Bourgeois' work may also shed new light on the agency of female characters written (or co-written) by both Buñuel and Medem.

The films studied here all use *mise-en-abîme* to draw attention to the artifice and voyeurism at play when framing the object of the gaze, focusing the viewer's attention on acts of surveillance and on moments of scopophilic pleasure, where the female subject is, or appears to be, the object of the gaze. These idealised female bodies are then revealed to be more than they initially appear. Consequently, these film narratives present male characters in association with female bodies that are, in keeping with tradition, 'associated with secrets, with something that lies darkly hidden behind the mask' (Gutiérrez-Albilla 2008: 43). *Cet obscur objet* makes an explicit reference to psychoanalysis and Freud, and is narrated using flashbacks that mirror, and parody, some kind of communal therapy session. Almodóvar's psychotic protagonist relies upon cameras and screens to keep his patient/prisoner under surveillance at all times, drawing direct parallels between his illusion of mastery, that of Charcot, and of the viewer themselves. Medem uses hypnosis to structure his narrative, offering this as another kind of 'look', and a possible method for 'solving' the mystery of the elusive Ana. As we will come to see, the fact that *Ana* is so overtly motivated by grief raises a second central research question for this thesis, concerning the extent to which the female body functions in these narratives to mediate masculine crisis. This line of inquiry explores the relationship between idealised femininity and male hysteria represented by narrative trajectories launched by a masculinity in crisis, either on- or off-screen. As Christian

Metz writes, 'there is always a moment after the obvious observation that it is man who makes the symbol when it is also clear that the symbol makes man' (1982: 20).

Although for centuries hysteria was considered to be a feminine malady, in 1882 Charcot reported cases in men (Walusinski 2014: 72):

> The origin of the word and its heavy uterus-related gender connotation, besides being politically incorrect, grossly contradicts the clinical reality that males also demonstrate these symptoms (Boller 2014: VII).

Male hysteria has in fact been clinically identified since the 17th century, and Charcot's research suggests that it manifests in exactly the same way as its more notorious feminine counterpart, if not more intensely. It was understood that 'anger, fear, love, or grief could induce symptoms' (Pearce 2014: 4), all of which are vital elements to the genesis and narrative of the three films in question here. It is for this reason that we examine the way these 'female' bodies mediate the symptoms – fragmentation, deceitfulness, and inconsistency – of a masculine hysteria once removed. For Showalter, in the case of Sigmund Freud's famous Dora:

> Freud's interpretations of her problem reflect his own obsessions with masturbation, adultery, and homosexuality. Thus the narrative illustrates the doctor's hysteria rather than the patient's (1997: 85).[11]

This thesis explores the relationship between these male protagonists and the symbolic projection of their female 'patients'. As Showalter points out, Charcot 'screened' hysterical women for an invited audience, representing the female hysteric as a paradoxical figure of absence/presence, a body in torsion held motionless by the gaze (of a doctor, camera, or spectator) but internally travelling elsewhere (1997:

[11] Freud was a disciple of Charcot's and even named his son Jean-Martin Freud (1889–1967) after him.

31).[12] Hysteria has long been understood as 'the product of a dialogue or collaboration between the hysterical woman and the medical man' (Showalter 1997: 11), and this thesis asks whether it might also be the product of a 'dialogue or collaboration' between the onscreen woman and the male writer/director or his onscreen surrogate.

[12] Showalter continues, 'sketches, drawings, and paintings of the women were also reproduced and sold' (1997: 31), underlining the issue of woman as tradable commodity and the uncomfortable link between desire, hysteria and capitalism.

Different ways of looking

There is an abundance of scholarly literature that discusses Buñuel, Almodóvar, and Medem in relation to national identity and notions of 'Spanishness': see, for example, Marsha Kinder (1993), Paul Julian Smith (1994, 1996, 2006), Gwynne Edwards (1994 and 2009), Peter William Evans (1999), P. W. Evans and Isabel Santaolalla (2004), Duncan Wheeler (2012), Brad Epps and Despina Kakoudaki (2009), Mark Allinson (2001), Jay Beck (2000), Tatjana Pavlović (2009)**.** These studies have established a framework for new critical approaches Rob Stone describes as follows:

> As the picture of 'Spanish' cinema cracks up, each fragment is being claimed and polished for study by scholars who enrich the field with theories and frameworks, comparative analyses, case studies and associative links (2015: 428).

This 'disintegration of Spanish cinema' has brought about 'a move away from rigid definitions of its nationality' (Stone 2015: 428), and the question of 'Spanishness' has become gradually more complicated. This is highlighted by writers like Abigail Loxham, whose 2014 study of Medem, Josep Joan Bigas Luna and José Luis Guerín examines the work of three directors born in Spain in relation to alternative national and cinematic subjectivities. Epps and Kakoudaki assert that Almodóvar's visually complex and multivalent work demands 'a doggedly interdisciplinary approach, as if the films advocated breaking the boundaries of academic disciplines in much the same way that they push against cinematic and generic boundaries' (2009: 14-15). This statement can be extended to include Buñuel and Medem, whose work also pushes against cinematic boundaries in a variety of different ways. The wealth of existing criticism problematizing national identity in the work of these directors has laid the groundwork for studies (such as this one) that focus on thematic rather than national/cultural connections.

These three directors explore sympathetic and mutually illuminating thematic territory. Julián Gutiérrez-Albilla 'reconceptualizes Buñuel's Spanish-Mexican films beyond geographical, historical and disciplinary boundaries', and reconsiders a selection of five of his films 'as part of twentieth-century visual culture' (2008: 5). And this thesis also stages a conversation between these three films that moves beyond the geographical, historical, and disciplinary boundaries to investigate the striking absence of woman at their centre.[13]

The academic study of Spanish cinema has been through what Jo Evans describes as 'a series of theoretical turns' including investigation into the role of the auteur, the economics of production, the balance of power in the field of the gaze, the bias towards the art film, and increasing interest in 'embodied' viewing that attempts to 'acknowledge the impact of the viewer's position (gendered, academic or otherwise) on the process of perception' (2015: 327). She continues, 'announcing a speaking or viewing position is what lies at the heart of contemporary theoretical advances' (J. Evans 2015: 327). It is therefore important to acknowledge that it may be easier to step outside the paradigm of a national cinema from a foreigner's perspective: Núria Triana Toribio notes the relative freedom of critics of 'Spanish cinema' who operate within the UK, highlighting the inherent critical distance of the outsider's viewpoint (2008: 48).[14] Concluding her own recent study of peripheral identities in Spanish cinema, Loxham writes, 'the identity (national or otherwise) of cinema will always depend on the location of the scrutiny or from where we are looking' (2014: 184). In this case, although these three directors were all

[13] For a comprehensive discussion of national mythologies and cultural fetishism in relation to the Carmen myth, see Kathleen Vernon (2004).

[14] Although, at the same time, we should also remain alert to what Andy Medhurst calls 'cultural kidnapping', citing Almodóvar as an example of the pre-eminent queer director: 'Almodóvar has become such a benchmark figure for a certain internationalized version of queer culture that the precise, rooted core of his cultural belonging is as often as not elided or played down. His films offer such rich pickings for those eager to write about camp or gender performativity that they are routinely excised from their Hispanic contextual specificity and placed in a grid of intellectual reference points that are overwhelmingly Anglo-American' (2009: 126).

born in Spain, the research questions this thesis asks are not grounded in the national or the geographical, but in the medical, art-historical and thematic.

Surrealists old and new

In this contemporary era of transcultural image-sharing and easy access to the art of different nations that is facilitated by the Internet and digital culture, it seems particularly valuable to cross national and geographical boundaries and stage interactions between multiple texts. Bringing films, sculptures, and paintings into conversation with one another, my emphasis on the visual also takes its cue from Gutiérrez-Albilla (2008), who pursues 'alternative avenues of investigation' in his focus on the study of sexual dissidence and its articulation in visual texts (2008: vii).

Triana Toribio notes the increasing communication between film departments and those of language and culture – an exchange between an approach that privileges textual analysis with those that examine films from within their ideological, cultural and theoretical context (2008b: 58). She also gives Smith credit for initiating and deepening the encounter between Spanish cinema and critical theory, in particular psychoanalysis, queer theory and feminist theory (2008b: 55). Smith's work is another important antecedent for the approach to textual analysis I employ here: his comments (in conversation with Rob White) cites the debt *La piel* owes to Bourgeois and the connection between her unusual sculptures and Freud's essay on the uncanny are another important point of departure for my own analysis.[15] Furthermore, it is important to underline that Buñuel, Almodóvar, and Medem now have the kind of international profile that means there is no danger of a study like this one adding to their ghettoization as 'Spanish directors'. Gutiérrez-Albilla's pursuit of 'the multiple forms of sexualities and desires in the textual unconscious of [Buñuel's] films' (2008: vii) is another natural precursor for this study, which builds on his approach by focusing on the representation of women.

Looking at the connections between these directors and surrealism justifies (should it be needed) a psychoanalytical approach that reaches

[15] <http://www.filmquarterly.org/2011/10/escape-artistry-debating-the-skin-i-live-in/> [accessed 22/2/17].

easily across disciplinary boundaries. Stone and Gutiérrez-Albilla emphasise that:

> The Surrealists believed in the significance of the violent force of desire – a desire for an impossible object that provoked the shattering of one's subjectivity, defined as *l'amour fou* (2013: 4).

The three films studied here are united by their exploration of 'mad love' and desire that is, I will argue, related to hysterical expression. In these films the female protagonist shares attributes with the classic *noir* femme fatale, a nightmarish figure that Foster Hirsch describes as a projection of 'male fears and fantasies' (1981: 157) and that Stone, building on Hirsch's comments, describes as 'a surrealist concept' (1998: 175).

Buñuel is considered the founder of surrealist film, and his 1929 collaboration with Salvador Dalí, *Un Chien andalou,* the first of its genre.[16] After a period of exile, he re-established an international career in filmmaking from Mexico City, Buñuel made six French language Franco-Italian co-productions, that concluded with *Cet obscur objet,* the final film that saw him return to 'a radically Surrealist presentation of unconscious desire' (Williams 1981: 154) congruent with that of *Un Chien*.[17] It is significant for this thesis that Buñuel's body of work opens and closes with acts of violence acted out on female bodies that set up a cinematic

[16] In fact, *La Coquille et le clergyman*, which premiered in 1928, is a contender for the title of 'first surrealist film'. Written by surrealist Antoine Artaud and directed by Germaine Dulac, during filming Dulac apparently denied Artaud any input, and their resulting dispute triggered a riot during the film's premiere, with Artaud supported by his surrealist cronies. As Lee Grieveson writes, the film 'inhabits the subconscious mind of an obsessive priest', with woman appearing as an object of desire and repression that he pursues through the landscape of his own mind <http://sensesofcinema.com/2007/feature-articles/film-theory-antonin-artaud/> [Accessed 3/3/17]. Despite being overshadowed by Buñuel and Dalí's project the following year, it was the first to develop the aesthetic principles that became typical of surrealist cinema. Buñuel reportedly saw the film, and there are certainly parallels to be drawn between the way it is filmed and *Un chien andalou*.

[17] Gutiérrez-Albilla (2008) takes a fresh look at the 'películas alimenticias' (P. W. Evans 2004: 2) that are largely ignored by critics in favour of his seemingly more complex French films.

world in which women frequently suffer violence at the hands of (ardent) men.

Almodóvar's postmodern eclecticism is often surreal, whether because his characters deliver crushingly 'normal' dialogue in the context of surreally absurd situations (Pepa and Candela's conversation about the Shiite terrorists in *Mujeres al borde*, for example), or because of the absurd juxtapositions staged between contemporary and traditional culture (such as the drug addicted nuns in *Entre tinieblas*, 1983).[18] Although Almodóvar may not be surrealist in the Buñuelian (or Bretonian) sense, his films nevertheless explore the limitations of reality and fantasy, exploiting the versatility of cinema and the visual medium in all its forms, as exemplified by his nods to advertising and the music industry. P. W. Evans notes Almodóvar's interest in 'the crosscurrents of sex and violence' (2009: 101), while Leo Bersani and Ulysse Dutoit point out that '*Matador, Live Flesh,* and *Kika* all have climaxes in which a man and a woman kill each other' (2009: 246). This theme was equally fascinating to the surrealists, whose work frequently depicts women/female bodies as the victims of violent acts.[19] Almodóvar's postmodern representation of gender as masquerade; his deployment of 'deviant' sexual practices such as S&M and urophilia; his elevation of marginal and gender-bending characters to centre stage; and his reiteration of postmodern identities that are constantly in flux, all contribute to the fact that Linda Williams identifies him as Buñuel's successor when it comes to giving screen time and space to various perversions initially familiar from surrealist motifs.

Zigor Etxebeste Gómez describes Medem's world as 'superrealista', bracketing him with Buñuel and also mentioning David

[18] Henceforth referred to as *Mujeres al borde*.

[19] For a detailed discussion of sex, violence, and the avant-garde see Richard Sonn (2010), in particular the first chapter, 'Gender and Political Violence: The Case of Germaine Berton' (pp. 27-53) which examines the surrealists' fascination with this 20th century anarchist murderer: 'If the anarchists were put off by the eruption of the irrational in their midst, the surrealists were fascinated by the story of life and death, of eros and thanatos, revolutionary politics and violence, love and suicide, that coalesced around the figure of Germaine Berton' (Sonn 2010: 53).

Lynch, Krzysztof Kieslowski, and David Cronenberg (2010: 52), three more directors, who might be considered contemporary surrealists.[20] Finally, the interest in the liminal spaces between consciousness and unconsciousness that is explored in all of Medem's films to date casts him as a contemporary surrealist whose work has common themes with that of Buñuel; for example, the forest in *Vacas* (1992), the desert in *La ardilla roja* (1993), and the island in *Lucía y el sexo* (2001) all function as spatial embodiments of the unconscious where surreal, oneiric sequences are played out. In fact, Medem directly cites the importance of Buñuel to his own work, directly acknowledging his influence: 'Bergman y Buñuel me fascinaban' (Angulo and Rebordinos 2004: 175).[21] Medem describes a desire to make films that are intimate and poetic (Angulo and Rebordinos 2004: 175), and his interest in psychoanalytic theory, and the evidence of it in his films, provides further links with the surrealism we associate with Buñuel.[22]

The interrelationship between the work of these three auteurs has been noted by critics. Diana Fraser identifies Almodóvar as 'a present-day surrealist, engaging in explorations of art, film, and Freudian theory through surrealist conceptual and technical methodology' (2013: 12). Epps and Kakoudaki cite Buñuel as an important influence on Almodóvar, along with other directors as diverse as Douglas Sirk, Jean Cocteau, John Waters, Andy Warhol, Ernst Lubitsch and Billy Wilder, emphasizing his significance outside of national borders (2009: 4). J. Evans draws a link between Medem and both Buñuel and Almodóvar, when she identifies Medem's surrealism as Buñuelian and notes that 'Medem cites a debt to Almodóvar, […] whose films also question individuality and

[20] Stone also identifies Lynch as 'a frequent point of comparison with Medem' (2007: 119).

[21] Indeed, the effect of Buñuel on those that followed in his footsteps has been discussed in detail; 'in subsequent Spanish cinema, we can trace explicit and implicit intertextual relationships between Buñuel and Spanish film movements and filmmakers' (Stone and Gutiérrez-Albilla 2013: 22).

[22] Given the number of films to date made by each director, the sheer volume of material makes more in depth discussion of their other work less feasible here, although it leaves plenty of scope for further investigation at a later date.

gender relationships' (2007: 12). P. W. Evans describes Buñuel as 'the Almodóvar of his day' in his confrontation of taboos through humour (P. W. Evans and Santaolalla 2004: 18), he also highlights Buñuel and Almodóvar's 'common interest in black comedy' and 'the contents and discontents in relations between the sexes' (2004: 1). Linda Williams identifies Almodóvar as 'the successor to Buñuel' in the context of rendering a 'compendium of perversions' with 'a light touch and a sophisticated sensibility' (2008: 221). This caustic thread of dark humour is one of the many things that makes a comparative study of these directors interesting, underpinning, as it does in each case, their treatment of the following themes: Buñuel's anarchic, scatological, and blackly comedic representation of bodily functions and sex finds a successor in the transgressive punk aesthetic of Almodóvar's early work – from urophilia in *Pepi, Luci, Bom* (1980) to the vomiting heroin addicted nuns in *Entre Tinieblas*. It resurfaces in Medem, who is also prone to scatology, as demonstrated at the end of *La ardilla roja*, and again in the surreal climactic scene of *Ana*. For Epps, Almodóvar's films focus on the potency of sexual desire in which hysteria is a key element: 'framed largely around figures of femininity and homosexuality: figures subject, in Almodóvar's eyes, to nervous anxiety, emotional exhaustion, flamboyant histrionics: to hysteria' (1995: 99).

The work of these three directors is woven together by their collective obsession with desire, transgression, violence, and the presentation of reality seen through a surreal lens, themes that are also central in Bourgeois' work.[23] They are also unified by a commitment to pushing the boundaries of conventional cinema in order to explore its potential for representing experiences that language is inadequate to describe, most notably here, the experience of desire that so effortlessly mingles extreme pleasure and extreme pain, with fear. In *Cet obscur*

[23] Mitchell explains that Bourgeois 'already had a good sense of psychoanalytic theory through her contact with the Surrealists in prewar Paris'. Once she arrived in America she commenced full psychoanalysis with Henry Lowenfeld, a Freudian, from 1952-1967 (2014: 11).

objet, La piel and *Ana*, the strength of this particular drive subsumes the protagonists and leads, in each case, to physical violence. Each film demonstrates an explicit, even compulsive fascination with sex and the erotic, and each director's body of work repeatedly interrogates the power and nature of desire as if seeking an answer to its exhausting call. In these three films, sexually charged violence is enacted on the bodies of women, or bodies that are diegetically coded female; these female protagonists function as 'figures of desire', to borrow the title from Williams' 1981 analysis of surrealist film.

Nomads, monsters, and Louise Bourgeois' resistant femininity

In *The Cinematic Body* (2004), Steven Shaviro declares the psychoanalytic model for film theory 'utterly bankrupt' (2004: ix), an opinion that Martine Beugnet explains is based in new approaches in film studies that emerged in the early 2000's and are strongly indebted to the writings of Gilles Deleuze. This new way of reading film is interested in a more phenomenological approach to the material – the woman, for example, is both phenomenon *and* psychoanalytic symptom. Beugnet writes:

> In film theory in particular, the psychoanalytical model is generally seen to subordinate the object of its studies to that of a system of representation governed by a set of pre-established rules (determined, in turn, by the overarching norm of male, heterosexual desire) (2007: 9-10, note 9).

However, she goes on to note that a complete rejection of a psychoanalytical line of investigation would be troublesome, especially where feminist and gender studies are concerned. This analysis engages with both forms of criticism, acknowledging the existence of subject positions for psychoanalytic readings, whilst bearing in mind the rhizomatic fluidity that the Deleuzian approach offers, which Gutiérrez-Albilla so convincingly argues for in *Queering Buñuel*.

The encounter this thesis stages between Deleuze and Félix Guattari and these directors follows in the footsteps of a number of texts: Jean-Claude Seguin Vergara (2009) offers a Deleuzian reading of Almodóvar's cinema, using Deleuze and Guattari's rhizome to focus on fragments and images, in an interpretation of his films as 'territorios, extensiones, zonas turbias y abismos' (2009: 9). The use of Deleuze and Guattari in this context is further encouraged by the ground laid by Stone and Gutiérrez-Albilla, who explain that Deleuze and Guattari's 'conception of desire is not contingent upon binary categories and exclusions, nor is it connected with lack, as in Lacan' (2013: 10). This enables us to 'rethink Buñuel's cinema' via Deleuze and Guattari's "schizos/flows" that move

through partial subjects, and explore the unconscious as 'a revolutionary interaction of intensities' (2013: 10).[24]

This conceptual flow is informed by Deleuze and Guattari's 'nomad thought', a style of thinking that revels in the possibility of infinite connections between different elements, encouraging their synthesis while at the same time maintaining their integrity as separate heterogeneous entities. This analysis appropriates Deleuze and Guattari's catholic approach to encourage a collapsing of boundaries between disciplines to create new 'assemblages', which illuminate the texts in question via juxtaposition. Over the course of this thesis we shall return to the fact that images speak directly to other images, creating a lineage of visually referential texts and objects in dialogue with one another unrestricted by time and place. Without seeking to offer absolute answers, this discussion stages these interactions with a view to opening up new pathways to contemplate hysterical representations and representations of hysteria, and provide new ways of visualising the ever-present feminine gap. Gutiérrez-Albilla widened the scope of visual analysis to include art objects, and Vergara's emphasis on 'las geometrías, curvas, líneas, círculos' of film (2009: 9) inform the choice of the arch of hysteria that shapes this analysis, held together critically by Deleuze and Guattari's rhizomatic model and a history of psychoanalytical inquiry that dates back to Charcot – the shape of the hysterical arch that offers a visual 'way-in' to these texts.

Barbara Creed defines the monstrous-feminine as 'what it is about woman that is shocking, terrifying, horrific, abject' (1993: 1); her ideas about female monstrosity emerge from Julia Kristeva's theory of abjection.[25] Creed explains that this female monster has many incarnations, including: the vampire, the witch, the primeval mother, the monstrous womb, the woman as bleeding wound, the woman as possessed body, and the woman as non-human animal, and that these

[24] Gutiérrez-Albilla also uses Deleuze and Guattari's productive theory of desire very effectively in his analysis of *El angel exterminador* (1962) (2008: 88-116).
[25] See Kristeva (1982).

tropes are consistently present in films of the horror genre. This analysis encounters similar embodiments of 'feminine monstrosity' in all three of the films studied here. It will suggest that woman is the absent Lacanian *objet a* that triggers narrative desire following Showalter's comment that 'for French feminists, the hysteric occupies the place of female absence in linguistic and cultural systems' (1997: 57).

Pavlović identifies 'the tumultuous relationship between surrealism and its representation of women, both venerated and objectified in the surrealist's quest for aesthetic expression' (2009: 29). This thesis traces a similarly 'tumultuous relationship' in the representation of Buñuel, Almodóvar, and Medem's female protagonists as products of the masculine (and surrealist) expression of the directors themselves.[26] Artist Mira Schor argues that 'woman is the *site* of representation' (1996: 14). These films feature women prominently, but as we shall see none is actually *about* a woman or *about* female experience. Helen McDonald writes that the 'ideal female body' has become a marketing strategy, making international corporations rich and prosperous (2001: 1-2) and doing little to combat the 'traditional exhibitionist role' (Mulvey 1999: 837) of women in cinema. An uncomfortable thread of commodity fetishism runs through the representation of female protagonists in each of these films, and linking them highlights their focus on the feminine role as the recipient of a (pseudo-medical) male gaze. In addition, all three films cast the central female character as an object with an exchange value. Having said that, McDonald goes on to explain that, art historically, 'running parallel to this discourse on the ideal female body is a shorter narrative of

[26] Berton fascinated young surrealists Louis Aragon and André Breton so much that they celebrated her in the first edition of their journal, *La Révolution Surréaliste* (1923). 'Germaine Berton represented not merely an anarchist *attentat* carried out by a woman but the conjunction of several powerful surrealist themes: women, violence, love, and suicide' (Sonn 2010: 77). They used her photograph on the journal's cover, surrounded by theirs, suggesting that they considered her at least a muse, if not one of them. Although this was not an isolated case – she was the first of several young female killers that caught the group's attention, including the Papin sisters immortalised in Genet's *The Maids*.

resistance' (2001: 2), with female artists challenging the patriarchal ideal in art, as well as the commercial norms of female beauty aided and abetted by capitalism.[27] Cindy Sherman and Judy Chicago are two such women artists whose work succeeds in drawing attention to, then filling, the feminine gap.

The inclusion of Bourgeois' artwork in this comparative close reading of these three films allows us to examine a potentially resistant configuration of bodies from under the skin, so to speak, as opposed to the way that male artists (and here, three white male artists, with all the privilege that association implies) represent them and use them as ciphers**.** Bourgeois' work offers a resistant model of femininity that embraces 'monstrosity'. Her work is embodied and often abstract or multiple in its representation of gender, speaking to the complex duality (or multiplicity) at the heart of human experience that tends to get obfuscated by reductive imaginings of 'woman' as a jumble of stereotypical characteristics (such as might be contained by the mysterious hessian sack that recurs throughout *Cet obscur objet*), or as caricatures of the idealised femininity produced by a repressive, patriarchal imaginary. Bourgeois' sculptures appeal through texture and physicality to unconscious desire: she 'makes the unconscious conscious' (Mitchell 2014: 14). They engage playfully with cultural conceptions of gender without fixing them to a particular symbolic order. In this analysis, the inclusion of Bourgeois' work serves to redress the balance in a cultural model that is still skewed towards masculine privilege and perspective. She is positioned here as a kind of antidote, and as a conduit to answer the question E. Ann Kaplan posed in 1983: 'could we structure things so that women own the gaze? If this were possible, would women

[27] The Guerrilla Girls are a collective of feminist activist artists who 'undermine the idea of a mainstream narrative by revealing the understory, the subtext, the overlooked, and the downright unfair' <http://www.guerrillagirls.com/our-story/> [Accessed 22/2/17], dedicated to fight for better equality in the art world. They recently published: *The Hysterical Herstory of Hysteria and How It Was Cured: From Ancient Times Until Now* (Paris: MFC-Michèle Didier, 2013).

want to own the gaze? […] What does it mean to be a female spectator?' (1988: 24).

The archers: Buñuel, Almodóvar, Medem

This reading suggests that, in these films by male auteur directors, the female body mediates masculine grief: the man in crisis bends the woman's body, metaphorically speaking, into a hysterical arch, a bow from which to launch the arrow of his own fears and neuroses.[28] Each chapter employs close formal analysis, with one film per section facilitating in-depth study, and the overall text is united by its focus on the absent female body and the hysterical arch. Jacques Lacan describes sexuality in terms of 'the curve of [its] fulfilment', and asks, 'is it surprising that its final term should be death, when the presence of sex in the living being is bound up with death?' (1979: 177). He quotes a fragment from Heraclitus in which the philosopher states: *to the bow is given the name of life and its work is death* (Lacan 1979: 177). This image illustrates a synthesis of opposites, a harmony of tension between two poles – that of life and death – similar to that embodied by the hysterical arch, which is a contortion that is both static and dynamic, and appears as closely related to pleasure as it is to pain. Lacan adopts Heraclitus' vernacular to describe the drive, explaining that 'what the drive integrates at the outset in its very existence is a dialectic of the bow, I would even say of archery' (1979: 177).

Mulvey identifies the 'eroticised form of the female star' as a 'perfect, streamlined image of femininity' (1996: 8), and what is interesting about each of these films is that they operate in a double direction, both conforming to Mulvey's statement in their presentation of a female object of desire, and undermining it by exposing/exploring the disavowed monstrosity of the imaginary ideal woman. Bourgeois' hybrid figures, some of which suggest a new visual language and some of which also

[28] I am grateful to Jo Evans for suggesting this striking image. Interestingly, there is an almost direct parallel in Brian Catling's novel *The Vorrh* (2012): here, the male protagonist is ordered by his lover, a dying female shaman, to convert her corpse into a bow and arrow; a living object that remains semi-sentient in its new state: semi-sentient may be the perfect way to think of the object of desire as hysterical projection—to some extent part of the subject, while in other ways its own entity.

critique existing social structures, offer an interesting perspective from which to reconsider these representations. Each of the female protagonists in question – played by Molina, Bouquet, Elena Anaya, and Manuela Vellés – are conventionally beautiful. Bearing in mind Creed's thoughts on feminine monstrosity, Linda Nead's statement that 'the female body remains a disturbing container for both the ideal and the polluted' (1992: 8) still stands. Buñuel's Conchita, Almodóvar's Vera, and Medem's Ana provide echoing archetypes of ideal and/or fetishised femininity that reverberate across a feminine void momentarily filled with two-dimensional caricatures of: Pandora, Galatea, Carmen, The Statue of Liberty (1886), the *femme fatale*, and the *Venus de Milo*. These reaffirm the feminine connection to the visible in a way that plays on the double meaning of 'to screen', with its potential for both concealment and display.[29]

Chapter two explores Buñuel's mischievous representation of idealised femininity in *Cet obscur objet,* a film that remains striking for the use of two female actors to represent a single role. It analyses the relationship between the feminine ideal and male hysteria, as is represented in the relationship between the two-bodied female protagonist, Conchita (Bouquet and Molina) and the male protagonist Mathieu (Fernando Rey). Bourgeois' *Janus Fleuri* and *Fillette* provide the counterpoint here, presenting an embodied sexuality that defies the gender/sex binary, incorporating both positions into an integrated other. This chapter also examines the recurrence of archetypal expressions of a feminine ideal in the references within the *mise-en-scène* to the *Venus de Milo* and Johannes Vermeer's *Lacemaker* (1669-70) and the underlying violence to which these images function as a foil, or counterpart.

[29] Identifying Almodóvar's 'self-fashioning' as operating along the same lines, Smith writes that the director's ongoing self-commentary 'follows a double movement of revelation and concealment' (2013: 23), enabling him to write himself in the public eye as 'a public artist in which carefully selected aspects of his life and art feed off one another' (Smith 2013: 33).

Chapter three extends this focus on idealisation and violence, highlighting the engagement with the artistic archetype — the female nude —and the theme of transgression in *La piel*. This chapter pays particular attention to Almodóvar's engagement with the horror genre, the representation of the transsexual female body as an abject space of violence, and with which side of the skin boundary 'true identity' may be said to lie. Here, we also explore the relationship between the art of Louise Bourgeois that is directly referenced in the *mise-en-scène* by her arch of hysteria (so reminiscent of Charcot's *arc-en-cercle*), some of her fabric works, and her *Femme Maison* series (1946-47), and the relationship of these art works to the construction of a central character who is coded female and acted (out) by the female body of actress Elena Anaya. This film raises overtly the complex desires that propel the intimate interrelationship between the doctor and the body of the patient. It compares this relationship openly (via Bourgeois) to Charcot and his captive hysterics in a way that usefully expands the role of hysteria in *amour fou*.

Violence, desire, idealisation and hysteria are also central to chapter four, which examines the traumatic origins of *Ana*, exploring the relationship between grief, desire and the body of the eponymous protagonist. The shadow of Charcot's *arc-en-cercle* emerges here in the narrative strand provided by hypnosis, which serves to highlight the fragmented female subject, who is alternately presented as an object of desire and as the subject of the narrative drive towards resolution. In this chapter, I argue that although Medem's narrative seeks to interrogate reactionary notions of female victimhood, it remains trapped by a traditional politics of the gaze. Accordingly, this casts the male as subject and female as object, as if Medem were a contemporary Charcot framing the image of the hysterical women as an object to be looked at that, as Showalter suggests, may illustrate 'the doctor's hysteria rather than the patient's (1997: 85).

Each of these films also features a diegetic 'author' of women: Mathieu narrates Conchita's story, Ledgard (Antonio Banderas) constructs the body of Vera, and Anglo (Asier Newman) deciphers Ana's 'chaos'. These three films directed by men therefore provide interesting case studies to examine the process by which masculine hysteria is deflected onto the female object of representation. This study examines the extent to which *Cet obscur objet* represents the inescapable, excessive, uncontrollable force (the explosion) of desire and its bewildering demands. It then turns its attention the way that *La piel* deflects the explosive impact of desire by placing the human (protofilmically female) body under a diegetic microscope that is both literal and figurative, exposing the body that instils such violent desire to a form of detached and clinical scrutiny. Lastly, it examines the way that the well-intentioned narrative of *Ana* attempts to set the female object of desire free, by giving her the symbolic wings of a dove with which to escape what is, paradoxically, also represented as an inescapable cycle of patriarchal violence and female martyrdom. In all three case studies, I shall examine the extent to which the female protagonist remains connected to a chain of established feminine archetypes that is usefully exposed in the connection with Bourgeois' work**.** Bourgeois' sculpture encourages an investigative framework that links Buñuel to Almodóvar to Medem not in relation to their national identities, but rather in relation to the way these films explore the relationship between hysteria and desire. Inspired by the frequent references to her artwork in *La piel,* Bourgeois' *Arch of Hysteria* provides the visual counterpoint to this comparative study.

Chapter Two: Janus Fleuri

(*Cet obscur objet du désir*, Luis Buñuel, 1977)

Introduction: this is not a love song

Thirty-nine years after its release, *Cet obscur objet du désir* (Luis Buñuel, 1977) still stands out for its representation of idealised femininity as an impossible desire.[1] The last in Buñuel's forty-eight year career, this film is famous for its use of two female actors in a single role: French Carole Bouquet and Spanish Angela Molina both play Conchita, the obscure object referred to in the title. According to Ronnie Scharfman, the film's narrative is 'something which looks like a love story but is, in fact, a non-love story, a story of the non-adequacy between desire and its object' (1980: 351). Casting two women in a single role visually emphasises this 'non-adequacy', and automatically positions the viewer in an interrogative space, encouraging inquisition and active engagement. Scharfman's non-adequacy also suggests a particular relationship between idealised femininity and male hysteria as represented by the film's two protagonists, Mathieu (Fernando Rey) and Conchita.

This chapter will investigate the techniques used to present the paradox of a desire that is governed by lack and excess simultaneously.[2] In the discussion that follows, I shall bring together the double nature of Mathieu's desire, its simultaneous lack and excess (so perfectly represented through the double casting of Conchita), with the problem of male hysteria to argue the possible connection between the two. I shall look at the way the figment of this impossible desire, Conchita, functions as an amalgamation of symbols that represent a femininity that is both idealised and monstrous, via connections with various images of Venus.

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[1] *Cet obscur objet du désir,* dir. by Luis Buñuel (Greenwich Films, Les Films Galaxie, Incine, Serge Silberman, 1977). Henceforth referred to as *Cet obscur objet.*

[2] 'Buñuel's knowledge of Freud (and also Jung) was extensive. Having read *The Interpretation of Dreams* as a student, he was also very familiar […] with many other key texts, including those on paranoia and femininity' (P.W. Evans 2004: 9).

Lastly, two of Louise Bourgeois' sculptures, *Janus Fleuri* (1968) and *Fillette* (1968) provide a fascinating and subversive counterpoint in their representation of femininity as a powerful, amorphous, and bisexual force.

This analysis of Mathieu's hysteria is rooted in the theoretical focus applied to Buñuel's Spanish language works by Gutierrez-Albilla (2008), and in some of the essays that make up the *Companion to Luis Buñuel* (2013) he co-edited with Rob Stone (such as those by Ramona Fotiade, Erica Segre, Ernesto Acevedo-Muñoz, Marsha Kinder, Paul Begin, and Sherry Velasco). Foremost among the terms of analysis is Gutiérrez-Albilla's idea of the 'transversal flexibility' of Buñuel's representational approach. The filmic narrative is adapted from the novel *La femme et le pantin* (1898) by Pierre Louÿs.[3] Its title is a manipulated quotation taken from Louÿs's text, which describes blonde women as 'pale objects of desire'. By substituting 'pale' with 'obscure', Buñuel and his co-writer, Jean-Claude Carrière, foreground the film's central question: can an object of desire ever be anything but obscure?[4] As a result, Gutiérrez-Albilla has noted, on both a textual and representational level, that:

> Buñuel's films supplement and intersect with other texts, thereby indicating something that is always in excess of the closure of representation and creating new representational spaces that encourage transversal, flexible readings that come and go limitlessly through space and time (2008: 12-13).

This flexibility encourages discussion that reaches beyond the purely representational, and as such our investigation of the representation of male hysteria seeks out those elements that exist in excess of the visible. At the heart of this analysis is the idea that this critical 'transversal flexibility' might be applied to the story Mathieu tells so that it is reflected

[3] Wood explains, 'for a powerfully original moviemaker, Buñuel works relatively rarely from original scripts. Of his thirty-two films, only eleven are *not* based on previously existing works, and those eleven are full of allusions and borrowed themes' (1981: 331).
[4] Carrière in *Une oeuvre à repriser*, by Luc Lagier (Studio Canal, 2005).

in the metaphorical tracing of an hysterical arch through the development of his confessional narrative arc. Bourgeois' pieces suggest a different vision of 'feminine chaos' that is not directly related to masculine desire.

P. W. Evans proposes that sexuality and male/female relations are Buñuel's most significant preoccupation (2004: 2), and this film presents the ultimate battle of the sexes as excruciating and humiliating, rendering Mathieu its infuriated victim. Defeated figures of masculine ridicule are common in Buñuel's films and are often played by Rey, who also appeared as Don Lope in *Tristana* (1970) and Don Jaime in *Viridiana* (1961), two other characters who, like Mathieu, are bound to the repeated and masochistic stereotype of once empowered masculinity beleaguered by its desire for the impossible female object.[5] In each case, their respective female counterpoint, or impossible other (Conchita, played by Bouquet and Molina; Tristana, by Catherine Deneuve; and Viridiana, by Silvia Pinal), stands in for what Kinder describes as the 'promiscuous sadist' (2013: 435), their four equally beautiful but different faces referencing feminine archetypes that reach beyond the constraints of these individual narratives, their 'promiscuity' inherent to their roving status in the collective cultural unconscious; or, as Kinder puts it, to 'the distinction between the rhetorical tropes of metaphor (with its concentrated chain of fetishistic substitutions) and metonymy (with its endless juxtapositions)' (2013: 435). In this analogy, Conchita is the metaphor: one in a chain of fetishised substitutions. Mathieu, on the other hand, functions as metonymy: the symptom, or part-object of a symbolic patriarchy intent on its own self-perpetuation, which in turn is exposed as foolish and clown-like in its subjugation. As part of the dialogue between the contradictory sides of an *objet a* that symbolises both lack and excess, this chapter will address the paradoxical but striking absence of

[5] This familiar parable of the foolish old man tormented in love by a younger woman recurs within Buñuel's body of work. As Stone and Gutiérrez-Albilla observe, 'already in *L'Âge d'or* the deadpan, lunatic face, the doubtful distinctions between reality and fantasy, the enquiry into fetish, the melodrama of frustration, and the calculated disruption of the audience's gaze are present and contemptuous of logic, propriety, and reason' (2013: 12).

woman at the heart of this film. Where Gutiérrez-Albilla's main focus is on queer readings of Buñuel's Mexican cinema, this reading will bring its attention to what strikes us as the greatest remaining lack – the absence of the woman at the centre of this text.[6] It will explore the relationship of this dynamic absence (oscillating between an absence based on lack and an absence based on excess) to the representation of what we might interpret as a representation of male hysteria.

In Luc Lagier's documentary about *Cet obscur objet,* Carrière explains their unusual casting decision, and states their belief that ambiguity is one of the defining characteristics of femininity.[7] He emphasises their desire to create a female character that would present woman as fundamentally elusive, describing that they 'were looking for a kind of life and truth in the limits of improbability and the impossible' (Carrière in Lagier 2005). Conchita is at once split and doubled: she has two faces, two bodies, but narrative and script treat her as a single character. Via close analysis of the film, we will explore the representation of desire through this figure of the paradoxically absent yet impossibly multiplied woman. In this dual motion of creation and destruction, Buñuel represents the vacancy both created and filled by the 'cet' of the film's title and underlines desire's insatiable need for excess, offering us two objects 'for the price of one'. Onscreen, however, Mathieu remains none the wiser. We will examine the way this film encourages us to read 'woman' as a timeless object that, much like the mysterious hessian sack that crops up throughout the diegesis, contains a jumble of concepts and associations, moving through the decades changing, yet still obscure. We will examine how Buñuel's own manifestation of a female *objet a* that echoes across time is underpinned by allusions to a

[6] Stone and Gutiérrez-Albilla suggest that 'we may rethink Buñuel's cinema as a springboard for reflecting upon the subject's liberation from his/her neurosis by privileging Deleuze's and Guattari's focus on the "schizos/flows" within, between and through partial subjects, thereby transforming the Freudian unconscious from a figurative or structural repository of repressed wishes into a revolutionary interaction of intensities' (2013: 10).

[7] *Une oeuvre à repriser* , by Luc Lagier (Studio Canal, 2005).

number of different feminine archetypes, including Pandora, Carmen, and the *Venus de Milo*. Building on Poyato Sánchez's observation that Conchita 'es integrado en la línea genealógica de una senda de mujeres, desde Carmen a Pandora, que a la postre – es aquí donde anida lo buñueliano – resulta transgredida' (2011: 13).

In the analysis of Mathieu's narration, we shall examine how the comedic elements of this film provide a further link to demonstrations of male hysteria as described by Charcot as 'clownisme'. Freud understood the significance of jokes for gaining access to the unconscious, and Buñuel teases the spectator with Freudian motifs such as the phallic train and yonic shell of 'Conchita' (a reference to the classical representation of Venus that we shall return to later).[8] As we shall see, this Freudian intertext is knowingly and explicitly addressed by one of Mathieu's travelling companions: the dwarf psychologist with Freudian facial hair (Pierre Pieral), whom English-speakers might read as an additional verbal-visual play on the word 'shrink'.

Finally, this chapter will also open up a dialogue with Bourgeois' work in order to explore the objectifying force of desire from a different perspective. Like Buñuel, Bourgeois' work is influenced by psychoanalytic approaches and constructs, and this, combined with her interest in Charcot's hysterical *arc-en-cercle*, encourages us to examine the way the same clichés haunt the portrayal of women as both idealised goddess and monstrous enigma. We will trace a pathway from the classical ideal of feminine beauty portrayed by the *Venus de Milo* and Bourgeois' sculptures to Buñuel's film in order to investigate the extent to which the representation of women as an echo or palimpsest of persistent archetypal projections may be related to the concept of male hysteria. We will explore the representation of Conchita not only as a figment of Mathieu's desire, but also as a form of hysterical projection, interpreting

[8] P. W. Evans notes the intersection of Buñuel's work and Freud's essay on comedy (Evans and Santaolalla 2004: 9).

her not only as an elusive object of desire, but also a figure that represents the close link between desire and hysteria.

As it brings together these different ways to understand desire, this reading of Buñuel will illustrate a representation of male hysteria that finds its roots in surrealism. According to Williams, the films of Buñuel's late French period saw him return to 'a radically Surrealist presentation of unconscious desire' (1981: 154) as a disruptive, frustrating but nonetheless propulsive force.[9] In addition, hysteria and surrealism have always been complementary partners: in the group's 1928 manifesto, Louis Aragon and André Breton proclaimed it the 'greatest poetic discovery of the nineteenth century' (Showalter 1997: 45-46). The French surrealists went on to adopt hysteria, considering it 'a language of the unconscious and dreams opposed to science and the academies', and therefore an ideal model for their particular challenge to the avant-garde (Showalter 1997: 46). Attracted by 'madness' the surrealists were, of course, drawn to the image of the hysteric as a transgressive figure existing beyond the reach of societal norms and demands, acting only in the service of his or her own agenda. Mathieu is initially presented as a character that is frustratingly bound by these norms, but as the narrative develops, his frustration deepens, driving him to outbursts of hysterical violence and despair. Instead of focusing on plot or characterisation, Kinder suggests that the spectator is encouraged to read *Cet obscur objet* 'for what it reveals about the dynamics of desire' (2013: 450).

This chapter adds to previous scholarly analysis of this film that, above and beyond her acknowledged association with the impossible or

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[9] Russell identifies Buñuel's 'late period' as being from 1963-77, starting in 1963 when Serge Silberman became a 'new, more solvent and reliable producer' (Russell 2005) <http://sensesofcinema.com/2005/great-directors/bunuel/#b1> [Accessed 3/3/17]: 1964 saw a return to French co-produced films which, with the exception of *Simón del desierto* in 1965 (Mexican production), continued until Buñuel's final film.
Belle de jour (1967, France/Italy); *La Voie Lactée* (1969, France/Italy); *Tristana* (1970, France/Italy/Spain); *Le charme discret de la bourgeoisie* (1972, France/Italy/Spain); *Le fantôme de la liberté* (France/Italy); *Cet obscur objet du désir* (1977, France/Spain).

elusive woman, the two figures of Conchita reveal that hysteria is the covert force behind the desire that governs Buñuel's Mathieu. This analysis will examine the extent to which Mathieu's narrative functions as an expression of hysteria. It questions whether this is brought about by a confrontation with the impossible object of his desire, before building on Paul Sandro's observation that Conchita may 'be defined paradoxically as both *lack* and *excess*, lack in her resistance and untimely absences, excess in her ubiquity, her dual incarnation, and her abrupt changes of personality' (1987: 144).[10]

The chaos of Conchita's lack of consistency is reflected in the film's terrorist subplot, which ensures that a menacing sense of danger punctuates the narrative. Buñuel declared, 'now that I am alone and old, I foresee only catastrophe and chaos' (1984: 252), a statement that is reflected in the progression of a narrative that explores the subjugation of an ageing male who finds himself adrift in a society with which he can no longer connect. Katherine Kovacs notes that while almost every statement spoken by Conchita is taken directly from Louÿs's text (1979: 95, note 4), Mathieu's speech and character is more closely connected to Buñuel himself. While the script remains largely faithful to Louÿs's plot, it makes significant changes to the narrative focus, splitting the story into different layers: the one narrated by Mathieu during the train journey, the events described onscreen in flashbacks, and the episodes at the beginning and end of the film that happen in the diegetic present. As a result, while Conchita speaks through the 'other' of Louÿs's text, Mathieu functions as a more direct projection and/or alter-ego of the director.[11] An

[10] The film begins with Bouquet and ends with Molina, but, as Carrière explains in Lagier's film (2005), the scenes are distributed equally, not thematically, leaving the narrative implications up to chance. This arbitrary swapping of bodies is crucial to understanding the fundamentally unstable nature of this representation of woman.

[11] Kaplan describes idealised 'male screen heroes' as figures that 'give back to the male spectator his more perfect mirror self, together with a sense of mastery and control' (1983: 28). Here, although Mathieu certainly benefits from all the usual trappings of white male privilege, Buñuel inverts this convention by placing him under siege, deliberately unsettling the function of an ego ideal by

emphasis on storytelling and the vagaries of subjective narration encourages the viewer to consider the relationship between narrative and desire: between Mathieu, the storyteller, and Conchita, the 'story told'.

presenting him in the process of losing his power – as the plot unfolds Mathieu's sense of mastery and control onscreen begin to melt away.

Synopsis

The first ten minutes of *Cet obscur objet* make up what Kovacs identifies as Buñuel's prologue: a sequence laden with images that initially make little sense, appear out of context, and have nothing to do with Louÿs' original text. Accompanied by the sounds of flamenco guitar music, an establishing shot of a street in Seville pans to the right and sweeps up skywards, coming to rest on the tops of six impressive palm trees framed against a pale blue sky. The film's title then appears in tomato red looping script, followed by the rest of the credits. The tone is playful and kitsch. Male protagonist Mathieu books a train ticket to Paris, before being chauffeured back to his grand villa, where his manservant Martin (André Weber) and a maid (Ellen Bahl) are waiting. They establish that a woman referred to only as 'she' is missing, and then enter the house. As they do so, a man with a large, bulging hessian sack thrown over his shoulder walks inexplicably across the screen. Inside, Mathieu and Martin enter an opulently decorated room that has clearly been the scene of a violent fight: they find broken ceramics on the floor, scattered soft furnishings, women's shoes, urine-soaked underwear, and a cushion with blood on it. It is established that these items (and blood) belong to the mysterious, absent 'she'. Later, the viewer may understand these details as a series of clues to notable themes and juxtapositions that recur throughout the film, such as: the comfort of Mathieu's privileged lifestyle versus revolution on the streets; the fastidious norms of polite society versus private brutality and sexual perversion; the threat of rape and sexual slavery versus slapstick comedy (Kovacs 1979: 97, note 18). At this stage, however, they have no context.[12]

The camera then cuts to another middle-aged bourgeois man (visually similar to Mathieu) getting into another chauffer driven car. The

[12] This particular juxtaposition – that of rape (threatened or enacted) and comedy – is also typical of Almodóvar's cinema. As I will discuss later, in *La piel* he uses Zeca's rape of Vera to visually quote an earlier rape scene from another of his own films, *Kika* (1993), in which comedy and sexual violence are uncomfortable bedfellows.

driver turns the key in the ignition and the car explodes. Mathieu and Martin are en route to the station and get caught behind the incident. Once they finally arrive, Mathieu leaves Martin in economy and finds his way to his seat in a first class carriage, where he meets the fellow passengers that will become his audience: a well turned out woman and her young daughter, a judge, and a dwarf psychologist with more than a passing resemblance to Freud. These characters are symbolically representative of orders social, moral, and unconscious.[13] Although strangers to one another, they engage in small talk and establish that they all move in the same affluent Parisian social circles.

A woman with a black eye and plaster on her forehead (Carole Bouquet) walks along the platform, her injuries providing a stark contrast to the cosy atmosphere in Mathieu's exclusive compartment. The fearful expression on Mathieu's face as he notices her board the train suggests she may be the mysterious woman discussed earlier: Conchita Perez. When Conchita finally reaches the front of the train, she finds Mathieu standing in the door of his carriage and begins to plead with him, begging him not to leave. The train starts to pull slowly out of the station, and Mathieu responds to Conchita's entreaties by unceremoniously throwing a bucket of water over her head. The train picks up speed and carries Mathieu away, leaving Conchita soaked on the platform. Unbeknownst to Mathieu, however, she boards the moving train in second class.

Returning to his carriage, Mathieu explains his unusual behaviour to his fellow travellers, who provide a captive audience both literally and figuratively. In what appears to be a deliberate parody of a psychotherapeutic session (enhanced, of course, by the presence of Freud-in-miniature as listener and interlocutor), Mathieu narrates almost the entire film in flashback, casting audiences both diegetic and extra-

[13] Buñuel was famously anti-morality. In his own words: 'I am against conventional morality […] Morality – middle-class morality, that is – is for me immoral. One must fight it. It is a morality founded on our most unjust social institutions – religion, fatherland, family culture – everything that people call the pillars of society' (Edwards 2005: 90).

diegetic in the role of analyst. His story of the sadomasochistic game of cat and mouse that unfolds between him and Conchita – who he describes as 'the worst of women' – is set against a backdrop of random and increasingly violent terrorist attacks. Their growing intensity mirrors the intensity of Mathieu's experience of what are, from his perspective, Conchita's acts of sexual terrorism.

Mathieu's story describes his desperate quest to possess Conchita, starting from when she first appeared in his life as an enigmatic eighteen-year-old, hired as a maid in his wealthy Parisian household. The softness of her hands and her inadequacy pouring wine suggest Conchita has not been a maid for long: she is in fact an impoverished flamenco dancer who lives with her mother, and occasionally travels with a couple of musicians. These include a young, vital, bell-bottom-wearing guitarist called El Morenito (David Rocha), whom Conchita encourages jealous Mathieu to see as an increasingly dangerous sexual threat. What unfolds is a tale of control and sexual obsession, a narrative of chance encounter in which Conchita drops in and out of Mathieu's life seemingly at will, alternately played by Bouquet and Molina, a fact never acknowledged within the diegesis. Each time she appears, she teases him with repeated promises of sexual intimacy that she then refuses him at the last minute. Conchita's teasing begins innocently enough with kisses and dancing flamenco in her underwear, but escalates: when she finally offers herself to Mathieu, it turns out she is wearing an elaborate chastity belt that he only discovers once they are in bed.

Several times, Mathieu tries to expel Conchita from his life, and at one point even has her deported from France back to Spain, but a succession of increasingly unlikely (and typically surrealist) coincidences manoeuver the two back together, leaving them trapped in a never-ending surreal game of chance that reiterates Williams' point about Buñuel's return to Surrealist principles in these later films.[14] The plot

[14] Kovacs also notes that the element of chance in Mathieu and Conchita's relationship is a very surrealist detail (1979: 96).

develops through a series of acts of invitation and rebuttal that crescendo in terms of both sadism and intensity, mirrored by the terrorist attacks that similarly persecute the increasingly beleaguered and ridiculous Mathieu.

Some time after Conchita's deportation, the lovers are 'coincidentally' reunited in Seville, ironically, at the point when Mathieu was bound for Singapore with Martin in a final desperate bid to escape his desire for Conchita. By chance, on an evening walk Mathieu discovers Conchita in the barred window of a villa he is passing. Initially, they appear overjoyed to be together again, but it is not long before Conchita's behaviour once again becomes cruel. She has a job dancing flamenco for tourists, and invites Mathieu to watch her the following night. Appropriately, the lyrics to the song she dances to are 'hay que ganar dinero'. Conchita then goes upstairs to 'rest' leaving Mathieu in the club but, tipped off by a jealous fellow dancer, he goes backstage and discovers Conchita dancing in only a pair of black stockings for tourists in a back room. He has a violent outburst and they fight, but then make up, and the outcome is that he promises to buy her a house. Shortly afterwards, Conchita's cruelty appears to reach its zenith.

Conchita waits until she has the key and the deeds to her new house and then, in a climactic scene in the courtyard of her villa, Conchita sets Mathieu up so that he watches in dismay through the bars of a locked gate as she appears to make love to Morenito, whose youth and good looks she taunts him with. This is a scene taken directly from Louÿs's book that appealed to Buñuel and Carrière from the start: they felt it a perfect illustration of Conchita's elusive character, which Carrière tellingly describes as 'one of the aspects of femininity from the masculine point of view' (Lagier 2005). Mathieu eventually leaves the torturous scene and gets in a taxi, which is then held up by a group of young men with a gun. They take the car and Mathieu is left, dejected and alone, once again hijacked by another man.

The following scene is set at Mathieu's villa in Seville, which we recognise from the opening sequence. He is sitting outside while Martin

and his maid work around him. Conchita appears as if nothing has happened, and sits next to him at the table. She explains that after the scene from the night before she came to see if he had killed himself. Silently, he leads her into the house, and into a back room, where he shuts the door. Conchita tries to explain that the previous night's activities were all a hoax designed to test his love for her, but he hits her across the face before she can finish, knocking her to the ground. Mathieu then continues to beat her forcefully, hitting her in the face until she bleeds. Outside, Martin and the maid can hear the fight but do nothing to stop it. On the floor, her nose bleeding, Conchita triumphantly tells Mathieu she is still in fact still a virgin, and offers him the key to her house. He silently throws it back at her and leaves.

Back in the narrative present, the film audience knows – although Mathieu does not – that Conchita is also on the train. He has finished telling his story, and his fellow passengers appear to agree that Conchita got what she deserved. Conchita then appears with a bucket of water, which she slowly pours over Mathieu's head while he sits in his seat. The couple disembark in Paris arm in arm, and as they walk through the station, a trolley piled high with hessian sacks drives past them. On leaving the station, the couple walk through one of Paris' famous shopping arcades, and Mathieu is drawn to a scene in a particular window. Over the tannoy a male voice brings news of widespread terrorist activity, listing the names of various terrorist organisations, before loudly playing Wagner. Meanwhile, the lovers stop in front of the window and watch as a woman takes white clothing out of a sack identical to the one that recurs throughout the mise-en-scène. She sits down and with a needle and thread begins to repair some torn lace on a nightgown that is badly stained with blood. This final sequence directly references Vermeer's painting *The Lacemaker* (approx. 1669). Conchita wanders off, but Mathieu is transfixed. Eventually he joins Conchita and they have a disagreement that is inaudible to us over the Wagner, which is very loud. As Mathieu, bewildered once again, runs after his young

lover and tries to appease her, a sudden explosion occurs, the screen is engulfed in flames, and the film ends.[15]

[15] Earle explains surrealism's aim to dislocate and blow up representations of the real world. He writes, 'subbranches of the dislocated are the ill-at-ease, the uncanny, the alienated, the absurd, and finally the Stranger, all looking for some world where they can be at home, or perhaps finding their final meaning in alienation and dislocation as their own final truth' (2011: 124).

Mathieu: the hysterical narrator

In interviews, Buñuel stresses the importance of storytelling in a film but goes on to say that in his later work he is once again freed from certain commercial constraints. As a result he is able to 'introduce disturbing elements within the story that suggest a different dimension to things' (Turrent and de la Colina 1992: 175). Here, this different dimension is articulated in the back and forth between two different modes of narration: the story told by Mathieu speaking in the narrative present, and the story articulated in his flashbacks. These temporal strands are separated – or disturbed – by the train motif that provides momentum to the plot both literally and figuratively. While it is undoubtedly Mathieu's subjectivity that shapes the narrative, Buñuel creates a playful dialogue between these different devices, and only by reading between the lines (or tracks) can the narrative 'truth' is to be found, by unpacking both the complications of the narrative structure and teasing out the role of the train as a metaphor for its momentum.

On the train, Mathieu tells his story to four travelling companions, who make up a meta-audience that highlights the potential limitations of our own spectatorship and understanding of a narrative. Initially, each member of the group is presented as bound by a bourgeois politeness that encourages a surface level engagement with reality that prohibits deeper investigation for the sake of decorum. The little girl and the psychologist (two out of the five), however, represent comparatively marginal perspectives at opposing ends of the spectrum: it is the girl's innocence of subtext that enables her to be freely inquisitive, whereas it is the psychologist's supposedly advanced understanding of it that facilitates the same behaviour in him. It is an interaction between the two of them that interrupts the scene and breaks the atmosphere of delicate politesse: to the embarrassment of her mother, the girl tries to help the diminutive professor into his seat as if he were a small child. He, on the other hand, draws further attention to his difference when he responds to the judge pondering if they had been at the same bullfight with 'it would

be impossible to mistake me for anyone else'. The statement becomes ironic once we meet the two Conchitas, and particularly so if we consider Buñuel's claims that many spectators never noticed the fact that Conchita is played by two different people (1984: 250). The prospect of a spectator being 'too polite' to question this very unusual casting decision serves as a reminder of the potential complicity in remaining ignorant of the story that gets told between the lines. Suspension of disbelief can, it seems, go too far, and Buñuel appears to present Mathieu as a cautionary tale.

Mathieu is also a character split in two, except in his case the separation is temporal rather than physical: there is Mathieu the storyteller in the present, composed and confident, and Mathieu the unravelling lover in the past, swinging wildly between states of ecstasy and despair. His flashbacks enable a comedic critique of bourgeois hypocrisy designed to extend to the spectator as well. Like our onscreen counterparts, we bear witness to these scenes of Mathieu's humiliation, however the violence of what Buñuel shows us greatly exceeds what the diegetic audience sees: their journey from Seville to Paris is framed by Mathieu drenching Conchita as the train leaves the Spanish station, and Conchita's parallel retaliatory act as it pulls in to its French destination – both acts shocking in their absurdity but comparatively innocent when compared to the sadomasochistic game that plays out before us onscreen as the story unfolds. On the train, after Mathieu's provocative act his companions politely pretend that nothing has happened, and once again it is the little girl who breaks with convention by asking him about his behaviour. Her mother scolds her, saying that it is rude to ask questions, and in this exchange Buñuel exposes the hypocrisy of this bourgeois language of polite euphemism and avoidance. This dialogue urges an alignment with either the child or the psychologist on the margins of decorum, for it is only by breaking with the stifling social conventions that Buñuel so famously ridiculed in his films that they will be rewarded with the story that, in spite of appearances, they so plainly want to hear.

This film establishes narrative and desire as interconnected phenomena, linked through psychoanalysis. Lacan proposes desire is a discourse, and that the subject speaks in order to reclaim its lost object in an attempt to achieve mastery over it by manifesting it through language.[16] Sandro suggests that if 'Conchita and the story of her seduction are foregrounded as *objects* of desire, Mathieu, the passengers, and by extension, the viewer, become the *subjects* of desire at different levels of the discourse' (1987: 142). They/we become a heterogeneous entity cast simultaneously as listener, analyst, and audience, and the objects of our desire are similarly multiple: not only Bouquet and Molina but the narrative itself. Sandro declares the film to be a 'full-scale parody of storytelling, complete with incorporated listeners', and continues, 'the film may be as much about Mathieu's desire to tell his story and the passengers' desire to hear it as it is about Mathieu's desire for Conchita' (1987: 142).

If 'psychoanalysis is one way to think about how spectacle is bound to language and narrative' (Lebeau 2006: 21), then cinema, as Vicky Lebeau explains, is its perfect counterpart. On one level, this film is an allegory about 'the generation of textual desire in narratives' (Sandro 1987: 146), which it likens to the teasing back-and-forth of a masochistic relationship that creates a quivering atmosphere of *jouissance* but perpetually defers the resolution offered by more straightforward pleasure: or rather, to return to Buñuel's train metaphor, this representation emphasises the journey rather than the destination. It is the journey that facilitates the experience of communal *jouissance* visible in the diegetic audience, who are periodically shown literally perched on the edge of their seats, and who, although multifaceted, exist as a

[16] On the importance of narrative and discourse in the psychoanalytic process, Lacan writes: 'Whether it sees itself as an instrument of healing, of training, or of exploration in depth, psychoanalysis has only a single medium: the patient's speech. That this is self-evident is no excuse for our neglecting it. And all speech calls for a reply' (2001: 44). Interestingly, Neil Badmington cites David Macey's comment that Lacan was 'an admirer of Buñuel's films' (2010: 10).

singular subject in relation to a shared object of desire: Mathieu's story [Fig. 1].

Figure 1: Mathieu and his captive audience.

In this way they mimic (and mock) the cinematic audience in their seats (the subject of the desire is multiple yet functions as one).

Sandro notes that with this film, Buñuel 'literalizes the French expression *mise-en-train*, which means to get going' (1987: 144), underlining the importance of motion both literal and metaphorical to its narrative development. As mentioned, the act that sets Mathieu's story in motion is the water that he unceremoniously dumps on Conchita on the platform below as the train pulls out of the station. The full irony of this symbolic act becomes clear as the narrative of Mathieu's endless sexual frustration evolves: it appears that this is a story that begins at its climactic end. The story behind this dramatic opening/closing then appears to last the length of the journey from Seville to Paris, exaggerating the sense of temporal distortion provided by listening to and telling stories and further complicating the effect of diegetic verisimilitude. This, at the very least, suggests a degree of artistic licence on Buñuel's part, as the Seville-Paris train journey would have taken over twelve hours and neither storyteller nor listeners emerge the least dishevelled at the journey's end.

Initially, it appears that the impetus for Mathieu to tell his story is the need to justify the bucket of water incident these strangers have just witnessed: in response to the girl's question, he asks, 'you'll agree that it's better to throw water on someone than to kill them?' The absurdist melodrama of this rhetorical question suggests, however, that there is a secondary motivation for his confession. If we understand Conchita, who is framed as an object of desire from her first appearance onscreen, to be the story that Mathieu tells, then both she and the narrative itself are objects of desire, inseparable from one another. At this starting point, both woman and story remain unknown (obscure) but full of the expectation of their subsequent 'knowability' once the story starts to 'move'. We will discuss Conchita's fundamental obscurity later on, but for now, might we view Mathieu's desire to narrate as an hysterical response to Conchita's 'pregnant' unknowableness, a metaphorical *arc-en-cercle* catalysed by confrontation with his elusive *objet a*? The arc of Mathieu's narrative is reflected in the arc of the train's path from Spain to France, both powered by the impetus of a desire that is at once personal and collective.

The unarguably phallic train is a visual and aural motif that is not only tied to Mathieu's experience of desire but also to that of both extra- and intra-diegetic audiences. An economic symbol for the momentum of desire both sexual and narrative, the train is a device that interrupts and separates the various segments of Mathieu's flashbacks, each time bringing the focus back to the narrative present. Occasionally the sound of the train is separated from its visual presence to suture together two scenes with an aural representation of desire's building momentum. For example, Mathieu visits Conchita at the Parisian apartment she shares with her mother relatively early in their relationship and she is very flirtatious. As she coquettishly feeds him a sweet, the sound of the train thundering along the tracks crescendos while the camera lingers on Mathieu's ridiculous expression of lustful bliss as his lips wrap around Conchita's fingers [Fig. 2].

Figure 2: Conchita feeds Mathieu a sweet from her box.

In this image, Mathieu is feminized: it is he who is 'penetrated' by Conchita. The camera then cuts back to inside the train carriage (for the fourth time), where the group are in darkness as it passes through a tunnel and momentarily unable to hear him because of the noise. This presents sexual pleasure as an experience that overpowers the senses and halts progress. While in the tunnel, the little girl stands up to adjust her skirt and is rendered totally in silhouette against the others, appearing for a moment as a visual nod to the absent object of desire evoked by Mathieu's narrative, the mysterious "she" of the film's prologue. As a metonym for Conchita, this image highlights her girlishness and youth, which serves to remind us of the extreme age gap between Conchita and Mathieu and its figuratively incestuous subtext.[17]

Tom Whittaker describes Buñuel's 'art of transgression' as fundamentally linked to motion (in Stone and Gutiérrez-Albilla 2013: 47).

[17] Conchita's father is revealed to be dead in an early scene, and, hinting at incestuous undertones to Mathieu's desire for his much younger maid, this detail highlights the element of abuse of power in their relationship. It also recalls other incestuous dynamics between characters played by Rey and their younger objects of desire – both in *Tristana* (where Lope is her guardian but also wants to have sex with her) and *Viridiana* (where Jaime acts out his necrophiliac fantasy).

Here, this applies to the temporal shifts between the two modes of storytelling and of course to the train itself, which functions as one of the 'disturbing elements' Buñuel describes above. Once they have 'got going', stories ought to remain in perpetual motion until they reach the end, but here, it is the lack of progress in the story of Mathieu and Conchita that causes such frustration and despair. The association with the train as penetrative phallic symbol emphasises this frustration as, unlike his mechanical counterpart, Mathieu gets nowhere near his desire's destination.

The on-off nature of Mathieu's relationship with Conchita prevents linear movement from starting point to finish line, which, as the script makes clear, for Mathieu would constitute having sex rather than getting married: when asked by Conchita's mother if he wishes to marry her daughter, Mathieu replies 'I can't for the moment', even though he has just given the woman a large sum of money to bring Conchita to his house so she can live there with him. In a later scene, Mathieu describes his frustration at his sexless relationship with Conchita to his cousin the judge, who asks why he doesn't simply marry her. Emphasising how this film presents heterosexual sexual and romantic relationships as a fight to the death, Mathieu replies, 'if I married her I'd be completely defenceless'. As it stands, Mathieu and Conchita's relationship suspends him in an agonised state of permanent anticipation, constantly teetering on the boundary between desire and despair. Furthermore, the trope of movement paradoxically caught in stasis is encapsulated by shots of Conchita's feet while she dances flamenco, many complex movements that, effectively, take her nowhere as she dances on the spot (these are also the feet that will walk all over Mathieu).[18] Finally, this paradox is ironically reversed in the train journey: Mathieu thinks that by boarding the

[18] This stasis is reinforced by the presence of flamenco dolls in Conchita's room that are posed as if mid-dance but in truth inanimate and fixed on their stands.

train he is escaping Conchita, but we the viewers know she is in fact also aboard. Once again Mathieu is going nowhere, fast.[19]

Conchita ensures that at a certain point (nothing below the waist) her encounters with Mathieu will short circuit, condemning him to a form of coitus definitively interruptus. Buñuel replicates this experience for his audience, symbolically, using the train to disrupt our experience of the narrative in the same way: the first five train interruptions are metanarrative storytelling scenes in the narrative present. The sixth and seventh are just shots of the train itself, taken from various static positions on verges and banks that emphasise its speed and momentum (the runaway train of Mathieu's desire); the eighth takes us back inside the carriage for more of Mathieu the storyteller; and finally by the ninth we have 'caught up with ourselves' in the narrative present: Conchita is about to appear, bucket in hand, ready for vengeance.

Michael Wood notes the 'yawning, comic gulf between experience and all renderings of it' (1981: 339) that opens up in this film, and states that it teaches us 'to suspect all explanations' (1981: 340). Although the narrator, Mathieu, might appear to dominate the development of the story, the *mise-en-scène* of flashbacks functions structurally to undermine his 'authorial' position: these scenes make it clear that Mathieu is not driving this narrative train. Most significantly, only the cinema audience knows about Conchita's physical duality as Mathieu does not appear to notice there are two women. Furthermore, it is not remarked upon by any of his fellow passengers. They initially see Mathieu soak Conchita (Bouquet) on the platform and they do not see her again until their arrival in Paris, when it is Molina that appears ready to retaliate. This exposes the uncanny split: Conchita remains doubled in the diegetic present so that Mathieu's travelling companions do eventually see both women, but there is no acknowledgment by them or response to this. The film narrative

[19] At one point, pining desperately for Conchita, Mathieu tells his cousin the judge that if she returned he'd 'stay near her without moving as long as I could' – ironic, considering he is near her and they are both moving (as the train moves) and yet still going nowhere.

therefore invites the cinema audience in on a joke that the narrator himself never gets. As the film has deliberately drawn our attention to the fact that bourgeois respectability demands turning a blind eye to irregularities, we will never know if Mathieu's train companions have or have not noticed the switch. During filming, Buñuel reportedly commented to Rey that 'personne ne voit les choses comme elles sont, mais comme ses désirs et son état d'âme les lui font voir' (Drouzy 1978: 297), emphasising that Conchita is a projection of Mathieu's desire, which is, by its nature, excessive.

This is what Stone and Guitiérrez-Albilla highlight as Buñuel's 'deterritorialized gaze' (2013: 18), one that mitigates against over-identification with a particular subject position, encouraging the viewer to take a more detached and critical perspective:

> Neither offering us redemptive or complete condemnatory views of the world in which we live and, paradoxically, making us critically aware of the illness of our society, the cinema of Buñuel seems to invite us to reflect on the transformative ethical potential of subjectivity, thereby pushing us beyond ourselves, closer to other worlds and to others while maintaining their irreducible forms of being in the world (Stone and Gutiérrez-Albilla 2013: 44).

This film neither condemns nor redeems its protagonists, rather it uses them as pawns with which playfully to describe the crisis caused by intense desire. It presents them as alternately humiliating and/or humiliated, tragic, and funny, from a detached perspective that grants the spectator a bird's eye view of a situation in which Mathieu is clearly an unreliable narrator.

To return to Lebeau on the interaction between psychoanalysis and cinema: '[f]rom the very beginning of cinema,' she writes, 'the deluded – hysterical, traumatised, hallucinating – spectator is a source of comedy' (2006: 11). Buñuel's stylised theatre of surreal and ludic frustration makes expert use of Mathieu as this clown-like figure to expose us all as potentially deluded spectators who may be hallucinating

Conchita's two faces.[20] To further complicate the presentation of narrative 'truth', yet another layer of narrative consciousness is introduced in the second of seven flashbacks, eighteen minutes into the film. In this sequence, Mathieu has just met and begun lusting after his young new maid Conchita, whom, with clearly dubious intentions, he asks to bring a nightcap of aphrodisiac green chartreuse to his bedroom. To his surprise, Conchita, although coquettish, refuses to acquiesce to his advances. After she leaves the room Mathieu, exasperated, turns down his own bed and then, sitting on it with a sigh, looks, for a brief moment, at the camera. This establishes a silent collusion with the viewer from within the flashback, suggesting an empathetic bond between Mathieu's desire and that of the cinema audience, fleetingly aligning our own voyeurism with his, and therefore also aligning both of 'our' frustration at its lack of fulfilment.[21] Mathieu's look circumvents the other layers of storytelling: it is not mediated by the version of him in the diegetic present or his meta-audience on the train, so it further complicates the layers of this narrative emphasising what Lacan describes as 'the ambiguity of the hysterical revelation of the past' (2001a: 52).

Kovacs explains that Mathieu 'reluctantly plays the part of a voyeur in his own story' (1979: 92), constantly on the wrong side of the threshold, kept outside looking in. If, however, we bear in mind Carrière's earlier statement that 'it's desire that we love and not the fulfilment of desire' (Lagier 2005), then Mathieu's status as permanent voyeur could actually be the key to his experience of masochistic pleasure, and the absurd truth that this film's narrative seeks to expose. Conchita's young and lithe guitarist, Morenito, repeatedly occupies the position Mathieu longs to take up, and the contrast between these two supposed love rivals is

[20] Interestingly, Guattari incorporated circus and performance into the psychiatric treatment offered at La Borde, an experimental French clinic where he worked from the 1950s. He developed its practice to include the schizoanalysis he and Deleuze later championed. Through Guattari's friendship with performer Jean-Baptiste Thierrée, La Borde 'gave birth to a circus' (Dosse 2011: 63), which became part of the treatment offered to its patients.

[21] This also suggests a direct appeal to what Mulvey (1999) describes as the 'male gaze'.

exaggerated for comedic effect. Morenito's style is relaxed contemporary (for the 1970s) – shaggy hair, bellbottoms, and denim – making Mathieu's manicured beard and multiple expensive tweed suits with matching hats look fussy and anachronistic. The two men are frequently portrayed in the same frame separated by increasingly ridiculous phallic symbols held by the younger man: initially in a Swiss park when Morenito mugs Mathieu at knifepoint, his 'erect' flick knife provides an ironic opposition to the 'flaccid' walking cane hung impotently over Mathieu's arm (yet another anachronistic symbol that singles him out as old fashioned).[22] Next, on a visit to Conchita's Parisian flat, upon Mathieu's arrival Morenito prepares to leave, zipping up his guitar case against his torso so the instrument appears like a giant phallus pointing at Mathieu who has interrupted their rehearsal [Fig. 3].

Figure 3: Morenito and his phallic guitar.

[22] This symbolic impotence speaks to Buñuel's own gloomy outlook: 'We live in an age of frailty, fear, and morbidity. Where will the kindness and intelligence come from that can save us? Even chance seems impotent' (Buñuel 1984: 252).

Like the train that interrupts his own story, Mathieu's arrival halts Conchita and Morenito from practising their joint performance of dance and music, both sensual activities with obvious allusions to sex. Later, when expecting Conchita to move in with him in Paris (as he has just paid her mother for the privilege), Mathieu answers the door with a red rose in his hand, held erect in anticipation. Instead of Conchita, however, Morenito is on his doorstep with the message that she will not come. The rose immediately droops as Mathieu's hand falls in disappointment, in a gesture reminiscent of the melancholy clown with water-squirting flower.

Like the terrorist attacks that provide a steady and explosive background to the plot, Morenito hijacks Mathieu's desire, repeatedly taking the older man's (desired) place and leaving him hysterical, traumatised, and hallucinating, so deluded, perhaps, that he does not notice that his lust object keeps switching bodies, disappearing and reappearing in a series of impossible coincidences.[23] This culminates in the ultimate act of traumatic (masochistic) spectatorship: when Mathieu watches Conchita and Morenito (supposedly) have sex from the other side of a locked gate that leads into the courtyard of the house he has just bought her. In this scene, Conchita taunts Mathieu by saying 'my guitar is mine. I'll play it for whomever I please', further aligning her with Morenito and his big, phallic guitar.

As noted in the introduction, Showalter has linked hysteria, performance and masculinity in her description of the way Charcot's female patients 'performed' their ailments to demonstrate his scientific/medical research. Showalter points out that:

> [Charcot] insisted that men as well as women exhibited the four stages of *grande hystérie*. Indeed, men had an even *grander* hysterical seizure, more athletic, acrobatic, and violent. Charcot believed that the athletic contortions of the fit came more naturally

[23] In one scene Mathieu reads a newspaper headline from a story about a hijacked plane that exploded, killing 290 passengers, which reinforces the relevance of a hijack motif that includes Mathieu and Morenito, his usurper, and the impossibility of Conchita's two bodies.

> to boys and men than to women, and named one phase of the four-stage hysterical attack “clownisme,” reflecting his own lifelong fascination with the circus (1997: 67).

Precisely a filmic version of this arch of hysteria could be said to be reflected in the ‘clownisme’ and playful surrealism of Buñuel’s cinema, evident from his first film, where the fast-paced, ironic back and forth of the lovers in *Un chien andalou* (1929) enhances their clownish aspect, and the lack of dialogue locates them within the tradition of mime long associated with comedy and clowns.[24] The bucket of water incident that instigates Mathieu’s narration is itself comedic, and once more reminiscent of the kind of circus slapstick that will ultimately provide a shocking contrast to the sequence when Mathieu physically attacks Conchita. When Conchita eventually retaliates, the scene is given added comedy value when the psychologist, having seen her coming, shrieks and leaps off his seat just as she tips the bucket over Mathieu’s head. Mathieu then chases her along the carriage and she runs into the tiny bathroom, where she stands with her arms folded and sticks out her tongue at him in a childish gesture of comedic reproach. It is a very different mood from the previous scene of shocking violence at the house in Seville where Mathieu leaves Conchita bruised and bleeding from the nose.

[24] William Earle notes the surrealists’ love of slapstick comedy, reminding us ‘that among the favourites of the old surrealists were Charlie Chaplin, Buster Keaton, and then the Marx Brothers’ whose films he describes as ‘an almost pure incoherence, full of surprises, insults, failures, pratfalls, and a beautiful zaniness which made no points whatsoever, whether moral or not' (2011: 47). In *Un chien,* Buñuel further underlines the comedic element in his ludic juxtaposition of Richard Wagner’s ‘Liebestod’ and Argentine tango as alternating musical accompaniments. A similar trick is used by comics such as Benny Hill (1924-1992) in, for example, the music hall derived *The Benny Hill Show* where the match of music to screen image highlights the absurd and has a way of making the unacceptable seem harmless (a man chasing and groping scantily clad women), and demonstrating the transgressive nature of a certain kind of comedy that is situated at the limits of what is acceptable. Clowns have always traced the limit between the funny and the sad, finding the surreal in the every day.

As discussed, Buñuel's filmography is, in fact, full of men ridiculed and made 'clown-like' by their inappropriate desires: Mathieu, Don Lope, and Don Jaime, for example, are all Pierrots pining for their Columbines.[25] Here, the male hysteric is a figure of amusement: in his exaggerated pomp and bluster Mathieu is clownish, his anachronistic mannerisms emblematic of his growing irrelevance in an increasingly violent world that continues to change around him. Mathieu is a character used to structural power and privilege, so there is pleasurable comedic value in witnessing his growing powerlessness onscreen as Buñuel uses him symbolically to stage an uncompromising humbling of the bourgeoisie. The narrative repeatedly contrasts Mathieu's old-fashioned, ineffective masculinity with the various incidents involving younger men on the street that are armed and full of action and purpose. The historical emphasis on man-as-artist and woman-as-artistic-subject that is parodied in Buñuel's clownish men, however, encourages us to further look for evidence of the masculine hysterical contortion in the structural and thematic elements of the representation of women in *Cet obscur objet*, as opposed to that physically displayed onscreen by the male body.

Velasco notes that the three male protagonists just mentioned (Mathieu, Don Lope, Don Jaime, all played by Rey) all share 'an obsessive personality that points to an underlying fear of castration' and a desire to 'protect themselves from the dangers of sexual relations with women' (2013: 368). The representation of castration anxiety in Surrealist film has been thoroughly discussed by Williams (particularly *Un chien andalou*, *L'Age d'or*, and *The Phantom of Liberty*), but here we have extended these earlier readings to focus specifically on the link between sexual desire and masculine hysteria.[26] In this context, we are less

[25] According to Wood: '*That Obscure Object of Desire*, for example, returns us very directly to *Viridiana* (1961) and *Tristana* (1970): the same immaculate actor, Fernando Rey, in all three cases; the same obsessive problem, the encroaching, enclosing desire of an older man for a younger woman' (1978) <http://www.nybooks.com/articles/1978/02/23/bunuels-private-lessons/> [Accessed 3/3/17].
[26] Williams (1981).

concerned with castration and/or the fear of sex, and more interested in the widespread fear of chaos channelled via the representation of sexual desire and woman, and the comedic effects of this chaos on Mathieu, who becomes a slapstick victim of repeat humiliation.[27] Ageing Mathieu's weakening virility offers the spectator the comedy and pathos of an agent of patriarchy under threat and beginning to crumble.

The story Mathieu tells his fellow travellers of his failure and exasperation has an interesting additional connection with hysterical expression. Didi-Huberman writes:

> Freud said that the most striking characteristic of hysteria is that it is governed by "active yet unconscious" ideas, and that it is, in fact, the efficiency of a "dramatic reproduction": facticity, the paradox of desire in representation, in which the hysteric *puts on view,* and even acts out, exactly that which *she cannot accomplish* (2003: 76) (original emphasis).

Change the 'she' for 'he' and this statement applies to the humiliated Mathieu, engaged in a 'dramatic reproduction' that, unbeknownst to him, is happening on several levels at once. The train motif that is both the engine for his story and the agent of its repeated interruption represents the 'active yet unconscious' force that drives Mathieu and the paradox of (his) desire: its need to remain unfulfilled. Mathieu tells the story of 'that which he cannot accomplish': sex with Conchita. His train journey also represents another unfulfilled desire: to escape Conchita, something else he is ultimately unable to do. This is because desire presents an impossible paradigm: Lacan states that 'not wanting to desire is wanting not to desire', or, 'not to want to desire and to desire are the same thing' (1979: 235).

One of the cures proffered for hysteria was 'the talking cure': psychotherapy. The thinking was that hysterical bodies strove to be understood via their physical contortions, but given the chance, they

[27] We shall return to this theme of feminine chaos in chapter three, in discussion of Medem's *Ana.*

could also express this suffering in words. Usually looked at alongside physical symptoms, doctors discovered that attacks of *grande hystérie* subsided once they started listening to patients (Edelman and Walusinski 2014: 17). This change in attitude towards the illness meant that 'not only did physicians have to begin listening to women (and men), but the patients also had to break taboos and find the words to describe their disease' (Edelman and Walusinski 2014: 17). In Mathieu's case, the hysterical act of pouring water on Conchita initially breaks the social taboo associated with his class and status (emphasized by the fact that he is in a first class compartment of the train), and sets the course for a confession that, if the flashbacks we bear witness to are anything to go by, repeatedly breaks with conventions around sexual propriety and behaviour.

Of primary importance is the fact that narratives about desire themselves incite yet more desire. Claire Kahane writes:

> Freud discovered that a conversation about sexual matters itself evoked desire, that especially the embodied dialogue between a masterful doctor and a vulnerable patient generated erotic and aggressive effects through and in the circulation of the speaking voice (1995: 16).

The speaking voice that 'circulates' is here belongs to Mathieu and, we may argue, in more ways than one: if we understand Mathieu's storytelling to be a metaphorical illustration of his hysterical *arc-en-cercle*, then his voice circulates both literally and figuratively. Kahane observes a link between the early modernist male narrative voice and hysteria, underlining the hysterical symptoms displayed in the texts she analyses as 'splitting, fragmentation, digression, dissociation' (1995: 127).[28] These same elements stand out in this film's narrative development that involves the splitting and doubling of both its protagonists (Mathieu temporally and Conchita physically) and where, as demonstrated**,** we witness

[28] Kahane's analysis focuses on several modernist novels including *The Good Soldier,* by Ford Madox Ford (1915) and *Heart of Darkness*, by Joseph Conrad (1899).

discrepancies between what Mathieu narrates verbally in the film's narrative present, and what Buñuel shows us in flashback.

Michel Foucault explains that confession is 'one of the main rituals we rely on for the production of truth' and that 'it came to signify someone's acknowledgement of his own actions and thoughts' (1998: 58). Foucault's observation that truth is not an absolute, rather that 'its production is thoroughly imbued with relations of power' (1998: 60), is played out in this narrative: it presents a particular 'truth' from a single character's point of view, and then exposes the discrepancies between it and a different possible presentation of 'reality'. Moreover, as Foucault points out, at the heart of this particular 'truth' is sex. *Cet obscur objet* literally stages 'the transformation of sex into a discourse' (Foucault 1998: 61). The scenes in the train carriage illustrate the way in which the interlocutor in a confession is also 'the authority who requires the confession' (1998: 61). By including a judge in its meta-audience, this film enacts this statement on a symbolic level. This judge, however, actively excuses Mathieu's offensive behaviour: when he returns to his seat after the initial bucket incident the judge's verdict is that, because he knows Mathieu's cousin (also a judge), and Mathieu does in fact 'seem like a normal person', that there must be an explanation for his extraordinary (antisocial) act. This sequence highlights the self-serving cronyism of the upper classes. It also pokes fun at the hypocrisy of Mathieu's bourgeois audience and their barely contained desire for the sordid details of his prurient tale.

For Foucault, the interlocutor possesses the power to require the confession but also to appreciate it, judge it, 'punish, forgive, console, and reconcile' (1998: 61-62). We see these elements represented in the roles assumed by each character in the meta-audience: the judge who may judge and punish, the psychologist (or secular priest) who will forgive, the mother who will console. Combined, all aid the confessor (Mathieu) to be liberated from his wrongs (violence against women),

purified, and to find salvation, which are, according to Foucault, the aims of confession (1998: 62).

Lacan explains that 'the unconscious is that chapter of my history that is marked by a blank or occupied by a falsehood: it is the censored chapter' (2001a: 55). The disparities and ellipses in the story Mathieu narrates, when compared to the story the film shows the cinema audience, highlight many of these blanks, be it in making light of his own acts of violence against Conchita, or in the motif of the mysterious hessian sack, which appears in both the diegetic past and present (as they disembark in Paris), that functions as a reminder of everything that exists outside of representation, or rather of all the hidden material the outward representation 'contains'.[29] Didi-Huberman describes Charcot's list of causes of hysteria as 'a chaotic and fantastic ragbag of causes' (2003: 72), which offers another speculation about the contents of Mathieu's 'baggage'. One hour and ten minutes into the film (well over half way through) Mathieu asks Martin for his opinion on women. He replies, 'I have a friend who is very fond of women, but he claims they're bags of excrement'. This line immediately offers one possible interpretation of the recurring sack's symbolic meaning: a metaphor for 'woman as abject remainder' and the repressed sexual 'baggage' we all carry. Lacan asserts, however, that 'the truth can be rediscovered', stating that 'usually it has already been written down elsewhere' (2001a: 55). Here, we might then argue that to piece together the 'elsewhere' of this narrative, the spectator must take the various levels of presented discourse and seek the additional messages that are encoded in the

[29] On the sack, Scharfman suggests that Mathieu 'may carry it around with him like unconscious memories from the past, or unconscious language usage' (1980: 356). Wood's opinion differs, however: 'What is important is to understand how the possibility of a meaning for this sack *spoils* its gratuitous presence in the film as an *objet trouvé (et retrouvé)*: an obscure objet of the kind André Breton scoured Paris for in *Nadja*. The very possibility of a meaning ruins a certain form of freedom, and it is this ruin and this freedom that Buñuel wants us to contemplate. He offers neither nostalgia nor wisdom, but an engaging practical example of the art of accepting defeat without learning to expect it' (1981: 338).

unconscious of the work itself – folded into condensed images (such as the sack) and actions ready for interpretation.[30]

Perhaps the greatest alteration made in Buñuel's adaptation of Louÿs's novel is that the problem of Mathieu's desire is never 'solved'. In the original text, the couple finally consummate the relationship, enabling Mathieu eventually (and violently) to claim his *objet a*: Conchita's virginity (which is itself a paradoxical, invisible 'object', a present absence). Buñuel's ambiguous ending, on the other hand, suggests that the couple never have sex and Mathieu's desire therefore remains, to return to Badmington's phrasing (used in the introduction to this thesis), 'unruly, troubling, ongoing' (2010: 10). The film denies Mathieu the ultimate pleasure of orgasmic ejaculation, thematically diverting its energy into literal explosions of terrorist violence. Instead, it is replaced by the troubling *jouissance* of unfulfilled desire, the product of which functions in accordance with Deleuze and Guattari's concept of the Body without Organs (BwO), as we shall come to see.[31] Interpreting this film as a hysterical text and Mathieu as a wry representation of a hysteric in full crisis aligns with its endless deferral of sexual intercourse: after all, sex was considered an effective form of treatment for the condition (Pearce 2014: 2). Consequently, in the context of Mathieu's narrative, sex with Conchita might simply represent one possible release from hysteria's deadly grip – a 'treatment' he is repeatedly denied.[32]

Having demonstrated the way that the train motif links both physical and narrative movement to the momentum of desire, and made the connection between the representation of Mathieu as clown-like and the hysterical expression as noted by Charcot, we shall now move on to

[30] Charcot proposed 'a theory of amnesia and of memory in general as a pregnance of images' (Didi-Huberman 2003: 135).
[31] This would explain why Buñuel has Conchita maintain what Kovacs describes as a 'spirited defence of her virginity' even though it might be 'somewhat anachronistic', considering the film has been updated to modern Paris and Seville (1979: 91).
[32] See Bogousslavsky (ed.) (2014) for a comprehensive study charting the evolution of hysteria and its treatment in the medical profession.

look in detail at Conchita herself, the obscure object of desire at the heart of this story.

Conchita: the hole in the heart of *Cet obscur objet*

Critics such as Badmington and Scharfman have set the precedent for applying Lacan to their analysis of this film, and this interpretation seeks to build on their discussion of lack by offering a theoretical counterpoint from Deleuze and Guattari. The experience of desire is a complex state associated with both lack and excess, and it relates to theories by both Deleuze and Guattari and Lacan that ought to be contradictory, but, in keeping with the voracious appetite of desire as it is explored in this narrative, both theories provide useful tools for interpretation.[33] For Deleuze and Guattari, desire is not constituted by lack, but is instead connected to pure productivity. They present it as a dynamic process that requires no external element to galvanise it, 'whether it be a lack that hollows it out or a pleasure that fills it' (2004: 170-171). They argue that desire is a generative force, the product of which is a Body without Organs (BwO): according to their philosophy, 'you can't desire without making one' (Deleuze and Guattari 2004: 166).[34]

This section looks more closely at the representation of Conchita as a figure indisputably governed lack, most obviously interpreted as a representation of the Lacanian *objet a*. It is via the repeatedly thwarted temptation of Mathieu that this narrative confirms the contradictory excesses of the desiring subject: ultimately, Mathieu's confession traces a narrative arc that unintentionally mocks his own deterioration, catalysed by Conchita, whether it is yearning for the missing *objet a* that takes strength from him or the energy required to produce the BwO that drains him. That Conchita can be understood as both lack (*objet a*) that stimulates desire, and the excess that is its product (BwO) is testament to

[33] It is important to acknowledge that their work is interconnected: before co-authoring *Anti-Oedipus* – a book that attacked Lacan's entire psychoanalytical career – with Deleuze, Guattari was Lacan's devoted pupil and even, for a time, his patient. Massumi offers a useful definition of Lacanian *jouissance* (2004: 587); although Buñuel was vocally opposed to the interpretation of his films, Wood writes that he was 'less worried, more amused by the inevitable victory of interpretation over life' (Wood 1981: 338-339).

[34] See Deleuze and Guattari (2004: 171-174) for an explanation of their denunciation of lack as an agent in the process of desire.

the way in which, to echo Badmington, desire 'mocks mastery': Conchita's ambiguity embodies the fickle reality of a drive that, much like the train that carries Mathieu as he delivers his narrative, is in perpetual motion.

The perspective on the male hysteric outlined in the previous section allows us to look back at the two women in this film as a product/fantasy projection generated by the metaphorical *arc-en-cercle*. As Sandro says: in its translation from page to screen, 'woman' has gone missing from the title. He draws our attention to 'cet' as the demonstrative adjective that tells us the subject of this film is, like the Lacanian *objet a*, 'not only a concealed object, obscured, covered over, but also near at hand' (1987: 141).

Buñuel's co-writer Jean-Claude Carrière demonstrates instinctively Lacanian insight into the lack or absence that stimulates desire:

> Because when we desire we don't know what we really want, what the object is. Oftentimes, the object remains obscure. We don't see it. This is reinforced by the fact that there are two actresses. It is hard to clearly distinguish the object. And sometimes, as we all know, we become desirous of desire itself. That is, it's desire that we love and not the fulfilment of desire. We love being in a state of desire, which is a state that lifts us above the banality of life. So the title seemed quite appropriate for this story with no end.[35]

Paradoxically, this obscurity or absence is emphasized by Conchita's excessiveness (her two bodies), a trick that certainly draws attention to how carelessly we look and how willingly we suspend our disbelief in front of the film screen. It is important to note here that Molina and Bouquet were supposedly both dubbed in post-production by the same female French actor. This would have aided any confusion by providing a seamless aural unifier, as the unchanging voice would support any 'change blindness'. It has, however, proved impossible to find a record of

[35] Carrière in *Une oeuvre à repriser* (Luc Lagier, Studio Canal, 2005). Translation from the French extracted from the film's English-language subtitles.

the French actor's name, despite being cited by more than three sources.[36] So, we find yet another absent woman at the heart of this film.

For Williams:

> Surrealist film exposes the fundamental illusion of the film image itself to focus on its role in creating the fictive unity of the human subject. It is thus both a visual art form that takes into account the problematics of the subject's relation to the image and a very sophisticated attempt to work against the identification process inherent in this relationship (1981: xvi).

Using two actors to play one part, this film both emphasizes the trick of 'fictive unity' Williams refers to, and engages the audience in the dialectics of subject/object relations. This also provides an unusual example of the dissected and fetishized woman of *film noir*, which feminist and psychoanalytical readings understand as symptomatic of the fear of castration.

If cinema is a 'royal road to the cultural unconscious' then film may be, as Lebeau suggests, 'a "symptom" of the cultures in which it takes up its place' (2006: 6-7). What, then, does this dual-representation of the feminine ideal tell us about culture? And what might a reading that takes into account other idealised icons of femininity add to previous readings of this film? What might it add to our understanding of the way the cultural unconscious (at least, in its manifestation by some directors) clings to the virgin/whore dichotomy, and how more diverse and complex representations of femininity (and masculinity, for that matter) might be embraced?

Buñuel says of *Cet obscur objet*:

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[36] Ella Shohat writes, 'two actresses, dubbed by a third voice, play the same role. Split in the image, the character regains a semblance of unity through the soundtrack' (2006: 124); Michael Wood notes, 'both girls are called Concha […] and have the same voice on the soundtrack' (1981: 334); mention of this is also made in Danny Peary's 1990 article on The Criterion Collection website <http://www.criterion.com/current/posts/895-that-obscure-object-of-desire> [Accessed 3/3/17].

> In addition to the theme of the impossibility of ever truly possessing a woman's body, the film insists upon maintaining that climate of insecurity and imminent disaster – an atmosphere we all recognize, because it is our own (1984: 250).

Building on the previous section's examination of masculine crisis and its relation to male hysteria, we understand this menacing atmosphere as the result of the relationship between (insecure) patriarchy and the threat of the repressed feminine return. We will now look at how these figures of repressed femininity that threaten 'imminent disaster' and frighten the established *status quo* may be better examined via their distillation into and connection with various recurring stereotypes. According to Showalter:

> As hysteria has moved from the clinic to the library, from the case study to the novel, from bodies to books, from page to stage and screen, it has developed its own prototypes, archetypes, and plots (1997: 6).

It is not, of course, a coincidence that many of these archetypes align so neatly with those identified by Barbara Creed's exploration of the monstrous feminine and her 'many faces'. These include, among others: 'woman as monstrous womb'; 'woman as bleeding wound'; 'woman as possessed body'; 'woman a beautiful but deadly killer'; 'woman as the deadly *femme castratrice'* (1993: 1). Kristeva's theory of abjection provides the theoretical perspective from which Creed approaches these archetypes, stating that the monstrous-feminine is 'what it is about woman that is shocking, terrifying, horrific, abject' (1993: 1), which might be another contender for the contents of the recurring sack.[37]

Conchita's monstrosity lies in her duplicity, and is emphasized by references to the *vagina dentata.*[38] These are contrasted with iconic figures of passive femininity, such as the *Venus de Milo*, which are more directed towards calming the hysterical fear of monstrous and enigmatic

[37] Kristeva (1989: 53).
[38] See Velasco (2013) for in-depth discussion of the *vagina dentata* motif in this film.

female abjection. In addition, there is a link between horror and humour that may be traced back to issues of hysterical 'clownisme' addressed above; Noël Carroll's observation that horror and humour share an intimate relation and affinity (2001: 238) leads Begin to deduce that both comedy and horror 'manifest repressed modes of unconscious thinking' associated with the Freudian uncanny (2013: 540). Understanding Mathieu as the embattled, hysterical figure of this film's ironic joke, to what extent might the dual Conchita stand in for the uncanny return of his repressed desires and fears?

Re-reading these idealised/demonized women via Bourgeois' work allows us to explore how this kind of hysterical masculine projection is confronted and confirmed by pieces such as *Janus Fleuri*, itself an uncanny object that may be read as an attempt to describe the experience of desire as dualistic and contradictory [Fig. 4].[39] The contrast between repetitive images of passive, mutilated femininity and Bourgeois' challenging pieces may shed new light on the excess represented by Buñuel (using two physically different actors in a single role) and that represented by Bourgeois in sculptures such as *Janus Fleuri* and *Fillette* [Fig. 5].[40]

[39] Lippard describes the aims of surrealist art as an 'emphasis on direct experience: physiological (unconscious as well as intellectual) identification, direct confrontation and communion between artist and viewer, with the work as the "communicating vessel"' (1970: 8).

[40] Mitchell describes the paradoxes of *Janus Fleuri*, describing it as 'a boy *and* girl. There are two clitorises or two flaccid penises; in between them is representation of the female genitals experienced from inside. […] Stasis and movement are captured in bronze – a hard material made to represent softness. The title of the piece reminds us that most flowers contain both male and female elements' (2014:12) (original emphasis).

Figure 4: *Janus Fleuri*, Louise Bourgeois (1968).

Figure 5: *Fillette*, Louise Bourgeois (1968).

Recalling similar provocations in Buñuel's own work (most notably in *Un Chien andalou*), Bourgeois' sculptures are surreal objects that dare the viewer to identify with them. As Siri Hustvedt writes, 'Bourgeois made a career of the mingled body, of penis and breast and buttocks and openings and bulbous protrusions that are neither one nor the other, not man, not woman' (2016: 30). These composite figures unravel the boundaries between masculine and feminine, presenting ambiguous bodies that question our identification with what we see. Again like Buñuel, Bourgeois' intention is to speak directly to the unconscious.

In *Cet obscur objet* Buñuel exposes 'the fundamental illusion' of cinema by using Bouquet and Molina in a single role, but the way the film engages with their beauty continues to speak to conventional, masculinist heterosexual subject-object relations, delivering not one but two objects for our scopophilic pleasure. Bourgeois, I would argue, pushes this dynamic further, to the point where the subject becomes largely abstracted and binaries collapse—closer still to the surrealist view of the unconscious as the place where oppositions cease to exist.[41] Is Bourgeois' work so transgressive precisely because it transcends the binary that Buñuel's images continue to uphold, despite their irreverent playfulness? Buñuel's unusual representation of Conchita as both dual and bisected woman certainly pushes the boundaries of conventional film making, but it nevertheless remains tied to the orthodox relationship defined by Mulvey where man is bearer of the look and woman is its object. In their hermaphroditic bisexuality, in my view, *Janus Fleuri* and *Fillette* appeal to a more amorphous, less socially conditioned sexual drive, one that dwells in the unconscious and is less mediated by certain restrictive parameters implemented by and carried within the symbolic order.[42] If we understand both film and sculptures to be probing the scope

[41] The surrealists stressed the importance of 'total freedom from social repression and destruction of barriers between conscious and unconscious, admissible and inadmissible behavior' (Lippard 1970: 7).

[42] Bourgeois describes the emotional impetus behind her work: 'Janus is a reference to the kind of polarity we represent. The polarity I experience is a drive toward extreme violence and revolt – and a retiring. I wouldn't say passivity, but

and limits of desire, what might be gained by re-reading this film via Bourgeois' work, in which the object of desire speaks back?

a need for peace, a complete peace with the self, with others, and with the environment (2006: 108).

Mirror with a memory: reflecting on the *Venus de Milo*

Buñuel exploits the contrast between flexible and fixed elements throughout his narrative and *mise-en-scène*, and Kinder explores this repetition of road and room imagery as a form of narrative expansion and compression. Acknowledging the link between this expansion and compression and the rhetorical tropes of metaphor and metonymy (and to Freud's view of the role of displacement and condensation in the dreamwork), she makes a further link with Deleuze on the aesthetics of the sadistic and the masochistic with her description of the aforementioned 'promiscuous sadist', writing:

> [The] distinction between the masochistic and sadistic aesthetics: masochistic lovers trapped in a secret room (as in *Un chien andalou*, 1929, and *Cet obscur objet du désir,* 1977) versus the promiscuous sadist moving from one adventure to another (as in *L'Age d'Or,* 1930, and *Le fantôme de la liberté,* 1974) (Kinder 2013: 435).

While Kinder emphasizes a dynamic that plays both ways, here we are less concerned with the lovers *per se* and more interested in the way the female counterpart in this frustrated 'couple' can read as a projection of masculine desire.

This frames Conchita not so much as a lover, or equal counterpart, but as an example of Kinder's 'concentrated chain of fetishistic substitutions' (2013: 435) that is produced by the hysterical force of Mathieu's desire. The *mise-en-scène* offers various links in this chain, starting with Conchita herself, split between Bouquet and Molina. There then follows a host of metaphorical and 'metonymical debris' (Scharfman 1980: 353) associated with her, including: the blood-stained cushion, discarded shoe and wet knickers from the opening sequence; the hessian sack; the shell box; the Spanish flamenco dolls in Conchita's apartment; and, of course, the blood-stained torn lace from the final sequence in the Parisian arcade.

Mathieu frames Conchita as an archetypal femme fatale from the start by justifying soaking her by describing her to his fellow travellers as 'the worst of women. The worst on earth'. As critics have stated, this continues as the plot develops: in reference to Louÿs' text, Pedro Poyato Sánchez writes 'Conchita, como Carmen, deviene, pues, en una de esas mujeres *relatadas* por hombres ya destruidos por ellas' (2011: 190), and identifies her as 'una heredera de Carmen' (2011: 190) because of her flamenco dancing. In both novel and film, Conchita functions as a cipher that caters to the fetish of Spanishness and the Españolada as exotic and spectacular. Poyato Sánchez's description of Carmen 'como mujer que se exhibe para la mirada masculina' (2011: 188) highlights her relationship with a scoptophilic pleasure coded as heteronormative and masculine that links the powerful combination of female seduction with the force of cinema and the important role of spectacle in both (Poyato Sánchez 2011: 193). This association is reinforced onscreen towards the end of the narrative when Mathieu watches Conchita dance flamenco in Seville: onstage she is the flamenco doll from her bedroom come to life. When he sneaks backstage and discovers her dancing nude for a room full of tourist men, the Spaniard that introduces her says 'typical Spanish girl, Conchita'. At this point Mathieu is staring at her through the glass window of a closed door – as usual, he is on the 'wrong' side of the threshold. A reverse shot from over Mathieu's shoulder, which suggests we are there too, pressed up behind him trying to get a better look, shows us Conchita (here played by Molina) naked apart from black stockings and a red flower in her hair, the relative innocence of the flamenco doll replaced by a more universal pornographic visual vernacular.

Figure 6: Mathieu watches Conchita through a pane of glass.

In this scene the commodity fetishism that has already played a part in Conchita's representation, both in how she is framed onscreen and Mathieu's desperate yearning to 'possess' her, reaches its apex: she is unequivocally presented as a tradable object of desire that a room full of men have paid to look at [Fig. 6].[43]

Wood writes that in this film women are presented as:

> [S]uch abstractions for men that it doesn't matter what they look like as long as they are properly attractive, show up in the right places, and answer to the right names. Furthermore, men are actually interested in only one part of a woman's anatomy – the dark object of desire, which is one meaning of the French title of the movie – so no wonder the rest of her body and her life is out of focus (1981: 334-335).

What kind of woman is Conchita, really? After a highly improbable and serendipitous collision in Switzerland, Mathieu visits her in Paris. Here, she tells him (and us) what kind of girl she is *not* – not 'that' kind, not the

[43] Chapters three and four will discuss the framing and presentation of the archetypal female nude in greater detail.

kind who will give up her virginity for the wad of cash Mathieu just handed to her hypocritical mother, whose overt piety forms an unconvincing smokescreen for her real role as maternal pimp – before showing him (and us) what kind of girl she *is*. In this scene, Conchita lies back on the sofa with her arms above her head and coquettishly displays her body. Flirtatious, she asks Mathieu to fetch her a box from the mantelpiece that is covered in shells. In classic Buñuelian style, it visually (and parodically) reinforces the symbolism and word play of her name. Mathieu then sits beside her and places it in her lap, and she spreads her legs wide so it sits on her pubis: Conchita and her concha. She lasciviously rubs her hands over the shells in an absurd gesture that openly mocks the tease of seduction, and Mathieu joins in with lecherous glee. She opens the box and, in a solemn voice, offers him a sweet that she then puts in his mouth, as mentioned earlier in this discussion [Fig. 2]. Here, Buñuel uses a close-up to brilliantly observe (and mock) the solemnity of flirtation, the way each minute gesture, no matter how banal, takes on a special almost slow-motion significance. Inside the box there is an innocuous collection of 'feminine things' that call to mind the nursery rhyme that declares girls to be made up of 'sugar and spice and all things nice': ribbons, sweets, and spools of thread [Fig. 7].

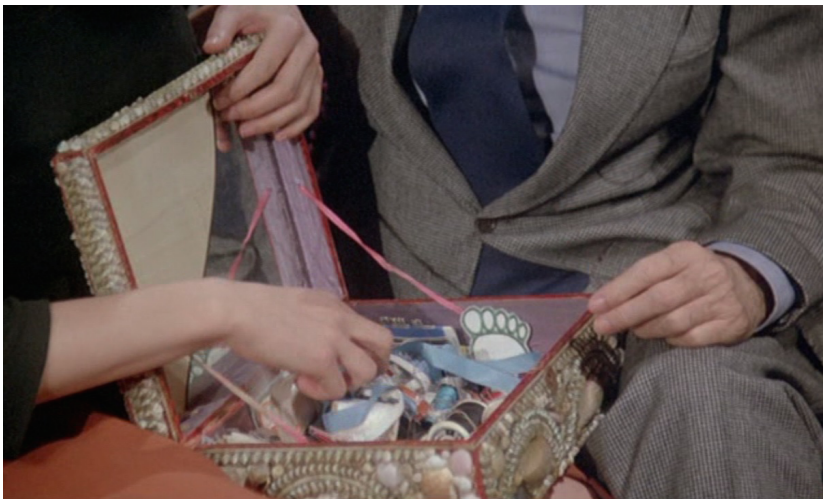

Figure 7: The anodyne contents of Conchita's shell-covered box

The anodyne contents of Conchita's metonymical box serve to show the lack of imagination in creating this 'woman' that is made up of clichés much like the age old, limiting, and boring virgin/whore dichotomy that her dual character invokes.

As discussed earlier, here the film makes a connection between the sound of the train and Mathieu's increasingly potent desire. This becomes relevant once again at this point in the discussion because it calls to mind the story of Pandora and her infamous box, a link also made by Poyato Sánchez, who notes that this cut reflects the myth: when Pandora opened her box, the world was flooded with evil; once Conchita's box is opened, the brusque cut to the poorly-lit train carriage that fills the screen with darkness and loud mechanical sounds can be interpreted as a representation of the world darkening with all the evil Pandora has unleashed on it (Poyato Sánchez 2011: 198-199). Here Conchita embodies another clichéd image of woman as cipher for terrifying mortal threat, again, like Carmen, an archetype linked to temptation and the fall of man, recalling the atmosphere of chaos that Buñuel directly described. Another interpretation is that the pitch of Mathieu's desire reaches such a height that the train explodes back into consciousness as they symbolically act out his greatest desire – to 'open Conchita's box'. He describes to his fellow travellers how desire for Conchita took over his life and he visited her every day, completely enslaved to the idea of possessing her. Buñuel mocks the absurdity of Mathieu's desire with a Freudian cliché by cutting to the train in the tunnel, and as Mulvey states, 'the gaze gets unmasked by comedy' (2010: 21).

Mysterious boxes that are metonyms for desire recur throughout Buñuel's work: P. W. Evans makes the link between the mystifying box that bewitches Deneuve in *Belle de jour* (1967) and its 'stripy forerunner' in *Un Chien andalou*, linking both via the mystery of their contents to the burlap sack that recurs here (2013: 500). The actual contents of Conchita's box are, however, not mysterious in the slightest, which

suggests an interpretation that hints at the obscurity referred to in the film's title as being connected not so much to the object itself, but to the drive to desire said (interchangeable) object. There are no surprises inside Conchita's box, and yet Mathieu is unable to walk away, his desire pins him in a behavioural loop intent on possessing her. As Lewis Kirshner writes:

> The Lacanian model is that it sees the tension between jouissance and desire as a permanent feature of every person's life, between the limits of satisfaction and the yearning for the impossible (2005: 89).

Here, Conchita represents an embodiment Mathieu's yearned-for impossible – a collection of female archetypes presented via a character of such excess that she has to split into two to accommodate it all. The gender-based clichés she embodies mark her as a version of repetition with difference of heterosexual male desire. It is this tension between two states that this narrative represents with such wryness.

Stone and Gutiérrez-Albilla suggest that 'Buñuel's cinema cannot be reduced to a Lacanian psychoanalytic emphasis on lack and castration and the privileging of the phallic signifier' (2013: 10). Instead, they also turn to Deleuze and Guattari, who propose a theory of desire that moves beyond the fixed positions of the Freudian Oedipal family: one that 'is not contingent upon binary categories and exclusions, nor is it connected with lack, as in Lacan' (Stone and Gutiérrez-Albilla 2013: 10). Intending 'to move beyond the interpretative and epistemological limitations that are imposed when one simply "applies" theory to cinematic practices' (Stone and Gutiérrez-Albilla 2013: 41), Stone and Gutiérrez-Albilla urge us to instead approach Buñuel's body of work from the perspective of Deleuze's and Guattari's schizos and flows which act through and within partial subjects, enabling us to start from an understanding of the unconscious as 'a revolutionary interaction of intensities', which we can then extend into our analysis of the film itself

(Stone and Gutiérrez-Albilla 2013: 10). In light of this 'revolutionary interaction of intensities', here, we examine Conchita as a shell (and the pun is intentional) hosting different incarnations of woman-as-object-of-desire. Her inherent duality encourages this approach; Conchita is 'whole' on screen only temporarily each time.

Initially introduced to us in her absence through the traces of her fight with Mathieu in the film's prologue (the discarded shoe, wet knickers, blood-stained cushion), we first see Conchita, played by Bouquet, standing with a black eye on the train platform in Seville. Next, she appears (in flashback) dressed as a maid carrying roses in Mathieu's house. Then, 16:05 minutes in, Molina appears onscreen, replacing Bouquet and dressed identically. From this point onwards Conchita, the aptly named 'shell' (the corresponding symbol to Mathieu's thundering train) is irrevocably split. This bisection and duplication of the female protagonist immediately shifts the spectator into a different mode of viewing and contemplation. For Gutiérrez-Albilla, 'transgression is located at a point of internal crisis, which shows the symbolic authority in a state of emergency' (2008: 6), but who is thrown into crisis here? In his later years, Buñuel was increasingly troubled by a dogged negative outlook, as demonstrated by his comment (quoted earlier) about the future containing only 'catastrophe and chaos' (1984: 252). This bleak declaration echoes the growing threat of violence in *Cet obscur objet*: the film's absurd attacks are representative of male hysteria externalized and objectified in the representation of woman, as well as the farcically named terrorist organizations (among them the P.R.I.Q.U.E, the R.U.T, the R.A.I.J, and the P.O.P).

This reading suggests that the female body functions in this narrative to mediate masculine grief: the man in crisis bending the woman's body, metaphorically speaking, into a hysterical arch, a bow from which to launch the arrow of his own fears and neuroses. According to this metaphor, we might speculate that the narrative of *Cet obscur objet* is one that retraces the arch of its masculine, heterosexual director's

own hysteria (the neurotic preoccupations of a man who claimed that in his dotage, all he could see in the future was this very 'catastrophe and chaos'), which is the grand movement that produces the hysterical narrative.[44] Showalter writes, 'I don't regard hysteria as weakness, badness, feminine deceitfulness, or irresponsibility, but rather as a cultural symptom of anxiety and stress' (1997: 9). If the successful patriarchal symbolic clings to the (metaphorical) phallus, it is worth examining more closely the symbolism of the beleaguered patriarchal symbolic, and focus on the hysterical paroxysm produced by the symbolic absence of woman. This, we believe, is where Bourgeois' work is particularly helpful.

For P. W. Evans, Mathieu and Conchita are trapped by mutual desire:

> And yet powerful claims of love-hatred on these unlikely lovers ensure their eternal inseparability. A further attempt to repair their relationship, symbolized—as Jean-Claude Carrière affirms in his Orion/Studio Canal DVD commentary on the film—by the woman in the arcade window sewing a piece of torn lace, is followed by an explosion. The violence of the terrorist is an apt final image for the explosive relationship of lovers drawn to each other through obscure desires (2013: 501).

While agreeing with P. W. Evans' view of the prominent theme of entrapment, this reading further indicates that the entrapment of Conchita-as-male-projection is overtly signalled by the irrelevance of the woman playing the part, or by the fact that two women play this part interchangeably. We extend this view of their entrapment (that, as P. W. Evans points out, is so clearly alluded to by the increasing force of the terrorist attacks), by focusing more closely on the role played by woman as a symptom of the hysterical man. This reading sees not so much two lovers trapped by desire, as one 'lover' trapped by his own idealised (agonising) fantasy. Conchita, or rather the two Conchitas, are Mathieu's

[44] See Gutiérrez-Albilla (2008: 16–52) for further discussion of the complex representation of a struggling masculinity.

projection; idealised, excessive and unstable, designed to keep him in the exquisite limbo of desire unfulfilled.

Approximately forty-eight minutes into the narrative, there is a visual connection with the *Venus de Milo*, that ancient archetype of feminine beauty and passivity [Fig. 8].

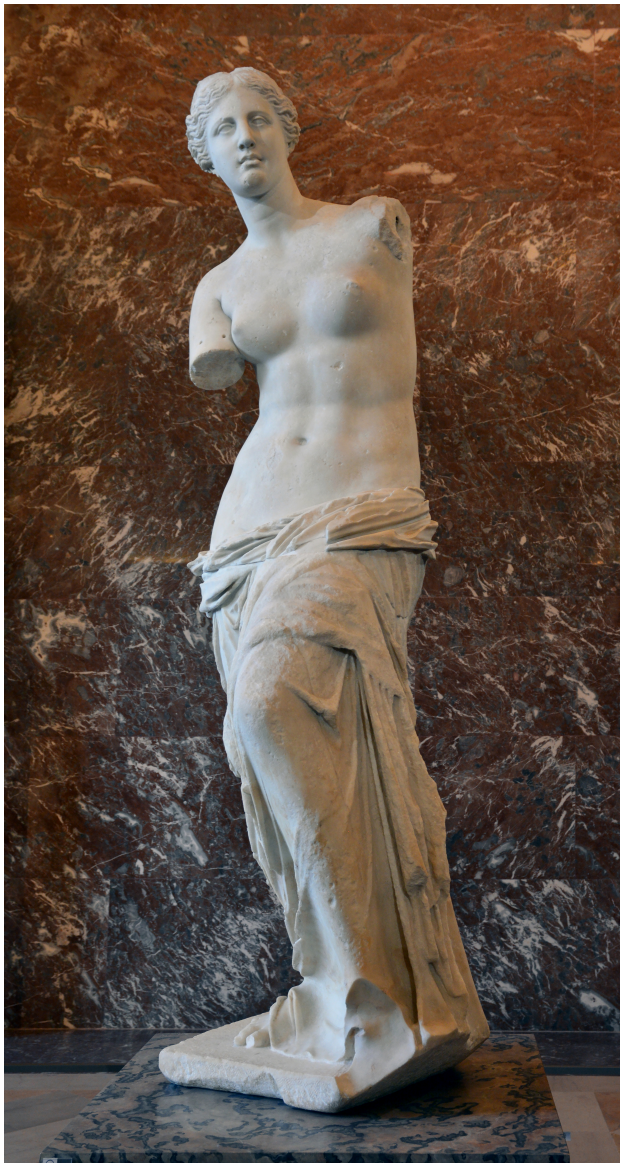

Figure 8: The *Venus de Milo* (130-100 BCE).

In this scene, Mathieu and Conchita are at his second house just outside Paris, where Conchita has finally promised to 'give herself' to him. In the bedroom, they kiss and then Conchita, at this point played by Molina,

goes into the bathroom to slip into something more comfortable. She puts on a white nightgown (the inviting virgin) and, in a typically contrary move, an intricately laced, flesh-coloured chastity belt (the cruel dominatrix) that covers her from stomach to mid-thigh—a juxtaposition that sums up the contrasting elements of her split character. Conchita, now played by Bouquet, then emerges from the bathroom. The camera follows Mathieu as he goes to close a window, and in the freestanding mirror to his right, Conchita's reflection becomes visible. She is initially out of focus, which, together with her white floor-length nightgown and the cross visible above her head, gives her figure a distinctly ghostly quality; she is the spectre of Mathieu's desire, the phantom not of liberty, but subjugation.

Slowly approaching the mirror, Conchita comes gradually into focus and begins to undo her nightgown. The camera pans gently to the right so that by the time she allows the thick straps to fall off her shoulders and the bodice to collapse around her waist, revealing her breasts, Conchita's reflection is framed perfectly in the centre of the screen [Fig. 9].

Figure 9: Conchita as the *Venus de Milo.*

This over the shoulder shot is set up so that the mirror (and Bouquet's reflection in it) is flanked on screen left by Mathieu, his back to the

camera, and on screen right by Conchita's physical self, her back also to the camera, creating a playfully knowing triangle of gazes. Our eyes, like Mathieu's, are drawn to the semi-naked figure in the mirror. She presents as an echo of the *Venus de Milo*: the fallen straps of her nightgown visually 'cut' her arms off just below the shoulder, mimicking the famous sculpture's amputated limbs, rendering her image a visual quotation of that renowned standard of classical beauty. This association with Venus, Roman goddess of love, sex and desire, is only reinforced by a shared shell motif. Just as, according to mythology, Venus was born fully formed on a scallop shell, an adult woman emerging from a sea that perpetually renewed her virginity, so Conchita emerges directly from Mathieu's unconscious.[45]

Initially, it seems that Conchita is looking at herself in the mirror while displaying her body to Mathieu, however a closer look reveals that to be a trick of perspective. Marco Bertamini et al describe this as 'the Venus effect', an optical and psychological illusion that they analyse via discussion of a number of paintings that include mirrors with impossible reflections.[46] They focus on examples 'where the mirror itself has become the object of reproduction and in it we see a meta-reproduction of the subject' (2003: 593), an image that in reality defies the laws of optics, instead providing an illusion. Here, the reality behind this optical illusion 'reflects' the relationship between Mathieu and Conchita, which we know (but he, it appears, does not) to also be founded on the perverse illusion that she, in her impossible multiplicity, presents.

A universally recognized archetypal symbol of the idealised feminine, the *Venus de Milo* is in some ways the ultimate *objet a*, exploiting what Williams refers to as 'the erotics of the deshabille' (2008:

[45] As she is famously depicted in Sandro Botticelli's 1482–1485 painting *The Birth of Venus*.

[46] Bertamini et al define 'the Venus effect' as follows: 'The Venus effect occurs every time the observer sees both an actor (eg Venus) and a mirror, not placed along the observer's line of sight, and concludes that Venus is seeing her reflection at the same location in the mirror that the observer is seeing' (2003: 596).

196). As a result, she figures as a recurring metonymical presence in the visual arts; people have long found the tension created by the sculpture's impossible perfection and the fact of her missing arms bewitching. Discovered in 1820 in the ancient ruined city of Milos, fragments found with her torso are thought to suggest that her left arm was holding an apple, a symbol of love, sex and seduction long before its infamous role in the Christian tradition. Anecdotally, French sailors broke off the statue's limbs in transit; this has since been disproved by drawings made at the time of its discovery in which she already had no arms.[47] This circumstantial amputation transforms her from active seductress to passive and mutilated object of the gaze.

Armless Venus is harmless, at once (symbolically) castrated and stitched up; her sex is covered by the sheet draped around her hips, a sheet that, here, we can imagine as another of the pieces of cloth stuffed inside Buñuel's hessian sack, another item of Mathieu's dirty linen that will be aired in public (Kolker 1983: 285). Like René Magritte's *Le Viol* (1934), where the features of a woman's face are made up from the elements in a naked female torso—breasts for eyes, belly button in place of a nose, vulva for mouth—this iconography emphasizes the violence and depersonalization of the traditional male gaze that, much like in a cartoon where a character's eyes turn to dollar signs to signify greed, the fetishized woman is reduced to an object in turn reduced to its purely sexual functioning parts [Fig. 10].[48]

[47] See Gregory Curtis (2003).
[48] Fotiade also makes a connection between the director and surrealist artist, referring to the mismatching of sound and image in *L'Âge d'Or* a 'Magrittean touch' (2013: 162).

Figure 10: *Le viol*, René Magritte (1934).

Incorporating these references to art historical representations of archetypal femininity and desire helps us to clarify Conchita's position in a long line of feminine signifiers.[49] If, as Luce Irigaray writes, 'woman, in this sexual imaginary, is only a more or less obliging prop for the enactment of man's fantasies' (1985: 25), then paradoxically, Conchita acts the way she does in the service of Mathieu's desire, not against it: it is crucial she remains enigmatic and out of reach in order to prolong his experience of desire.

References to the *Venus de Milo* recur throughout the visual arts, often as commentary on the commodification of woman as object of desire via allusion to this traditional example of passive femininity.[50] For example, Dalí's *Venus de Milo with Drawers* (1936) is another surrealist comment on woman-as-object (and pun on 'chest of drawers') that

[49] Much criticism focuses (rightly) on the voyeur in Buñuel. For an in-depth discussion of this theme, see Williams (1982: 193).

[50] For example, the *Venus de Milo* appears in David Lynch's surreal television series *Twin Peaks,* made in the early 1990's: a copy of the statue stands at the end of a long corridor in the programme's sinister and mysterious Black Lodge.

similarly suggests woman is both simply an object, and a threatening enigma of intriguing sexual mystery with potential dangers hidden in her 'drawers' (pun intended) [Fig 11].

Figure 11: *Venus de Milo With Drawers*, Salvador Dalí (1936).

Bernardo Bertolucci's *The Dreamers* (2003) is another film that directly references the *Venus de Milo* in its *mise-en-scène*: in her seduction of Matthew (Michael Pitt), Isabelle (Eva Green) uses a sheet and black elbow length gloves to imitate the famous statue [Fig. 12]. As he lifts the sheet around her hips and begins to perform oral sex, she coyly says, 'I can't stop you, I've got no arms', articulating what is at the core of this fantasy: the incapacitated goddess, passive and accessible. Bertolucci's use of this image passes comment on the language of images and how they can travel across time and place in an instant, in the same way as Gutiérrez-Albilla's 'transversal, flexible readings' that move 'limitlessly through space and time (2008: 12-13) that were mentioned at the start of this chapter.[51]

[51] Bertolucci's film is an homage to the power of cinema and the visual, and is full of other Buñuelian touches likely to be an overt homage, including a wooden

Figure 12: Eva Green as Isabelle in Bertolucci's *The Dreamers* (2003)

As we will come to see in chapter three, the penultimate shot in Julio Medem's *Caótica Ana* (2007) is of pop artist Jim Dine's giant sculptures *Looking Towards the Avenue* (1989; located on 6th Avenue in New York), three enormous bronze versions of Venus that stand at fourteen, eighteen and twenty-three feet high, each decapitated, rendering them yet more 'thing-like'; they have no agency but we can (and do) project onto them, the canvas for our assumptions.

The surrealists placed great importance on puns, believing them (after Freud) to provide a direct route to the unconscious; as Lucy Lippard notes: 'no linguistic (and now pictorial) form has deeper roots in the play between conscious and unconscious response to life than the pun' (1970: 3). Here, the pun in Conchita's name functions as a jokey metonymical symbol. Her full name is Concepción, 'conception' in English. This, shortened first to c*oncha*, the Spanish for 'shell', is also a slang word for vagina, playing on the sea-shell-as-vulva metaphor recognizable since the days of classical antiquity (and again, specifically referencing Venus).

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articulated arm, which calls to mind both the wooden leg in *Tristana,* and the severed hand in *Un Chien andalou*.

So, Conchita is a 'little shell', a symbol of absence and lack that metaphorically frames the very absence that fuels Mathieu's desire: her virginity. Or she is an elusive 'little cunt', an empty shell filled at different times by different allusions to other female symbols throughout the history of storytelling; stepping into the absent space carved out by the force of desire that waits for its next object to fall into place.[52] What's more, her name contains a cruel joke; in its full form, a noun that teasingly serves as an answer to the question of Mathieu's desire, with its implication of coitus, but, in its affectionate shortening it stands as a clue that he will never get the chance to achieve this conception, because the object of his desire will keep eluding him. Her two names suggest both a sanctified, holy sexuality at the same time as a base one, serving to highlight once again the presence of doubles and dual natures at the heart of this film, and further reinforcing her relation to Venus, goddess of love and sex who can 're-virginate' by returning to the sea. In this scene, Conchita-as-Venus is reflected back at herself and us with allusions to other feminine archetypes heaped upon her; to borrow Fotiade's term, this is a 'mirror with a memory' (2013: 162), providing an image of Conchita informed by 'remembered' feminine archetypes from the cultural unconscious.

Let us return to Conchita-as-Venus and Mathieu in front of the mirror [Fig. 9]. Conchita's figure is reflected centre screen, directly facing the camera. She asks, 'You see how beautiful I am?', and although her eyes are averted the words seem to address us directly, spoken not only by Bouquet as Conchita to Mathieu, but by the interchangeable female body as object of desire (Bouquet/Conchita/Venus) to those of us in possession of the gaze. Francoise Ghillebaert suggests that Conchita's question is an attempt to have Mathieu acknowledge and validate her identity via admiration, but he ignores her invitation, 'thus denying her existence independently from his desire' (2003: 63). As we have

[52] This looks forward to Almodóvar's Vera and Medem's Ana. The following chapters will explore the ways in which they, too, are also empty shells that are given meanings through repetition with difference.

suggested, she is, essentially, a figment of his desire, a metonym for the objects of all desires. Todd McGowan summarizes, 'the gaze of the object gazes back at the subject, but this gaze is not present in the field of the visible' (2003: 33). Here, it is not Conchita's eyes that gaze back at us but, much like Magritte's female 'victim' in *Le Viol*, her objectified body.

In response to Conchita's question, Mathieu roughly grabs her breasts. Conchita, in proof that she is not, in fact, a statue, but capable of fighting back, resists him; Mathieu accuses her of teasing him and then forces himself on her. It is heavily implied that his intention is to rape her, recalling Breton's misogynist statement that 'isn't what matters that we be the masters of ourselves, the masters of women, and love too?' (2004: 17). Buñuel, however, ensures that his humiliated protagonist's attempts are futile: Mathieu pulls the cover back and discovers Conchita's chastity belt [Fig. 13]. The scene is framed in such a way that it evokes yet another famous representation of Venus, this time Diego Velázquez's *Rokeby Venus* (1647-1651), and here it provides a 'transversal' echo that image drips with irony [Fig. 14].

This painting is one of the examples that Bertamini et al discuss with reference to 'the Venus effect', and focusing on the parallels in composition between the painting and the film still we can see two 'impossible' reflections. The first is the optical illusion that suggests Velázquez's Venus admires her own reflection, when in fact, as with the framing of Conchita's reflection above, in order for her face to be visible to the viewer, the image displayed to her by the mirror would be something quite different. The second is illusion metaphorical: reclining on her side, Conchita is posed like the Rokeby Venus, except while the object of desire Velázquez portrays appears seductive and available, Buñuel offers Mathieu (and the viewer) the contradiction in terms that is Conchita: both available and unavailable, naked but clothed, present but absent. Onscreen, Mathieu assumes the position equivalent (in the painting) to Venus' reflection in the mirror. Here, this distorted parallel provides another illustration of Scharfman's non-adequacy (1980: 351): taken

literally, the image of Mathieu wrestling with Conchita's chastity belt reads as the eternal frustration of desire frustrated; understood metaphorically, it suggests the solipsistic cycle of romantic and sexual obsession – Mathieu the desiring subject projects Conchita the impossible ideal object, and, because she remains a figment of his desire, her impossible 'reflection' can only be his own image.

Figure 13: Mathieu wrestles with Conchita's chastity belt

Figure 14: The *Rokeby Venus,* or, *Venus at her Mirror*, Diego Velázquez (1647-1651)

Staging an encounter between *Cet obscur objet* and Bourgeois' sculptures, Conchita's restraint paraphernalia speaks to the artist's fetishistic vernacular, recalling the uncanny stitched bodies and hybrid creatures that populate her work.[53] The image of Conchita lying on the bed, 'stitched up' and inanimate, reminds us that Irigaray argues that woman's 'entry into a dominant scopic economy signifies, again, her consignment to passivity':

> She is to be the beautiful object of contemplation. While her body finds itself thus eroticized, and called to a double movement of exhibition and of chaste retreat in order to stimulate the drives of the 'subject', her sexual organ represents *the horror of nothing to see*. A defect in this systematics of representation and desire. A 'hole' in its scoptophilic lens. […] Woman's genitals are simply absent, masked, sewn back up inside their 'crack' (1985: 26).

In this scene Conchita has enacted precisely the double movement of which Irigaray speaks: exhibition in the mirror, followed by a chaste retreat facilitated by her elaborate chastity-protecting undergarment. She is a perverse, life-size anti-sex doll; an uncanny object, simultaneously active and passive in her refusal. Defeated, Mathieu is left sitting on the bed crying, once again the humiliated clown. The last part of the above quotation evokes not only Conchita's chastity belt but also the final scene of this film with its symbolic allusions to the *restitutio virginitatis.* If Conchita is the catalyst for desire (its object), could the relationship between desire and hysteria be frustrated sexuality?

[53] These figures will acquire yet more significance in the following chapter's discussion of *La piel*, which quotes them directly.

Filling the feminine gap?

If Conchita is, in some ways, the perfect object of masculine, heterosexual desire (excessive, elusive, stimulating), then what of the suppressed discourse of female desire? Showalter writes:

> For French feminists, the hysteric occupies the place of female absence in linguistic and cultural systems. […] Thus the silent or nonverbal 'body language' of hysteria can be seen as a Mother Tongue that contests patriarchal culture (1997: 57).

According to Irigaray, because of the absence of a female subject in history and culture, it is only through identification with female signs and representations that women can reconstruct themselves and their subjectivity – a process that provides a reflection that is, as in 'the Venus effect', an illusion. One must enter the symbolic in order to become a subject, and if the whole symbolic order is masculine, one can only enter it as male. So, women are denied their authenticity and can only be traded within this masculine economy, excluded from an active subject position: the *Venus de Milo* (and other such archetypes) is a pertinent example of a feminine object that has been traded, both literally and metaphorically, between men throughout history.

Louise Bourgeois' work reclaims and fills this absence: *Janus Fleuri* powerfully subverts the dominant dynamic and speaks in this non-verbal 'Mother Tongue' [Fig. 4]. Instead of woman being exhibited for the male gaze, this figure represents the feminine as a potent, amorphous force, emerging from between the two phallus-like faces of masculine Janus. What is so powerful here, is that the object is not designed to appeal to the scopophilic pleasure of one gender/sex/orientation over another, but rather represents the uncanny bisexuality of desire, and in its own transgression of boundaries appeals to the freedom of our unconscious. Pre-dating Buñuel's film by nine years, we can read the sculpture as an antecedent to this story of a feminine that violently emerges out of a masculinity thrown into crisis. Here, the figure of Janus

is rendered as the heads of twin glandes, back-to-back and 'facing' outwards. Emerging between them, pushing them apart, is an amorphous feminine mass—a vulval form is 'flowering', its irregular, dynamic surface a stark contrast to the polished symmetry of the phalli. As the god of travel and transitions, it is appropriate that in the encounter we are staging here between Bourgeois and Buñuel, Janus might be said to cast his shadow over Mathieu, who is moving in two directions at once: his physical self propelled forwards, to Paris, and his narrative self moving backwards in flashback. Conchita is the unbridled feminine chaos that is secretly on the train, emerging between the two divergent Mathieus as the narrative unfolds.

Figure 15: The first of *Cet obscur objet*'s terrorist attacks, symbolic of feminine chaos.

The first act of terror that plays out onscreen in the film's opening sequence, when the car blows up, can also be read as a representation of the feminine as a potent but nebulous force connected to violent explosion. The sequence sets up a world of masculine affairs – wealthy men going about their business in the world of power and authority – that is then violently interrupted by an exploding car. As it is engulfed in flames, the camera focuses on the extravagant mushroom cloud that rises from the wreckage [Fig. 15]. This image of a devouring circular

shape suggests the connection between the feminine and irregular, frightening violent action that disrupts the external world.

Buñuel's career infamously began with a scene of female mutilation and with *Cet obscur objet*, it ends with an image of stitching shut. If *Un Chien andalou* opened space for the representation of all bourgeois neurosis, violence, humour, and fear, his last film ends with an image of bloodied lace being stitched up, and a terrorist explosion: the *vagina dentata* clamping her teeth shut and together with a bang. Velasco highlights comically exaggerated references to the *vagina dentata* in the film's *mise-en-scène*, describing how Conchita is 'consistently linked to teeth, mouth, and spitting imagery' (2013: 368). This reminds us not only of Bourgeois' explosive feminine, but also of Charcot's hysterical *clownisme*, and the relative affinity between horror and humour discussed earlier.

Velasco also notes Buñuel's reference to Vermeer's painting *The Lacemaker* (*c.*1669), a recurring theme in Dutch literature and painting used to illustrate archetypically feminine domestic virtues, and another 'memory' within this 'mirror' (screen) [Figs. 16 and 17].[54] Furthermore, the reference made to *The Lacemaker* in this final sequence alludes to 'the tradition of literary imagery concerned with sewing, embroidery, and weaving as metaphors for storytelling' (Sandro 1987: 154), that here function as a counterpoint to the gradual fragmentation of Mathieu's strength and virility in the face of his split object of desire. It also further emphasizes the importance of the act of narration as something that generates objects of desire that are both metaphorical and metonymical.[55]

[54] Sandro notes the 'complementarity between this last shot (the last shot in the production schedule of the film and last in Buñuel's career) and the image of Vermeer's *The Lacemaker* in Buñuel's first film' (1987: 154).
[55] Different ways of narrating/articulating the self are explored in both *La piel* and *Ana*, using art and hypnosis as conduits to a deeper 'truth' about identity.

Figure 16: A woman in the Parisian arcade mends a piece of torn lace.

Figure 17: *The Lacemaker*, Johannes Vermeer (1669-70).

In a reading that has correspondences with Creed's deadly *femme castratrice* and theory of the monstrous feminine, Velasco highlights the recurring image of sewn-up female genitalia in Buñuel's work, drawing our attention to possible connections to the *restitutio virginitatis* tradition.[56] She interprets these 'psychoanalytically charged' references to vaginal stitching as demonstrative of male castration anxiety and suggests that in these images 'there might lurk enduring and sustained cultural fears of women's sexual prowess and women's potentially castrating effect on men's psychosexual identity and behaviour' (2013: 363). In *Cet obscur objet* we see both a figurative sewing up of and bisection of the feminine that functions as a hysterical manifestation, both tantalizing and feared. This dynamic represents the human need to contain chaos; the instinct to sew things back together when they threaten to fall apart is also alluded to in the enigmatic sack that appears in the film, the metaphorical burden we all sling over one shoulder. This 'baggage' is, of course, at least partially filled by our socially conditioned notion of what should, or might, constitute our sexual other, a socially condoned set of co-ordinates that may be so far removed from our own subjectivity, not to mention the subjectivity of the 'obscure object', as to be impossible to live up to.

Discussion of the idealised and fetishized object as a symptom of castration anxiety have led to an important re-reading of women in *film noir*, but the playfulness of the representation of these interchangeable women in *Cet obscur objet* and the way they so overtly symbolize recurring postponement and disavowal suggests it may be more useful to read these symbolic women as an attempt to 'contain' the hysteria induced by impossible desires. As it punctuates the narrative, the hessian sack functions like a perverse riff on Pandora's box: once opened, chaos may be unleashed. According to this reading, this process of disavowal is generative, rather than defensive—it feeds the desire that Carrière noted

[56] Velasco has examined the 'obsessive interest in sewn-up female genitals' and 'female-phobic practices', medieval conventions associated with mending the hymen (*restituto virginitatis*) and genital mutilation in *Cet obscur objet* and *Él* (1952) (2013: 362–63).

is the real subject of this film: the desire to desire. The necessary elusive centre at the heart of woman becomes the catalyst for masculine narrative.

In this context, the obscure object of desire in this film (bisected/duplicate Conchita) functions almost like a Hitchcockian MacGuffin, a plot device that motivates characters and advances a story, but which may ultimately have no real bearing on the narrative. In this way, the two Conchitas are, in a sense, a red herring. The consummation of desire is never really the point; the point is to keep the desire alive. The final scene is crucial to this reading, as it is here that we see Mathieu fixate on the bloodied, torn lace [Fig. 18]. This sewn-up metaphorical 'wound' stands as a symbol for the impossibility of an hysterical desire for virginity, a desire that induces hysteria precisely because it can only be desired at risk of its own destruction.

Figure 18: Mending the torn lace.

We are led to believe this is a film about the all-consuming search for sex, when really it is about the incompatibility of sex (as a form of consummation) with desire (what predates the consummation). Conchita may be read at once as the catalyst for and the symptom of Mathieu's hysteria; the object of desire is a figment of the male protagonist's hysterical desire for desire itself. In this analogy, virginity functions as the

perfect metaphor for a desire that contains within it the seeds of its own destruction, playfully alluded to here by the terrorist attacks. The narrative drive of *Cet obscur objet* is provoked by a hysterical need to contain the 'horror' (Buñuel's neurotic terror at a future that is only 'catastrophe and chaos') associated with sexual desire and women; to transform the terrifying chaos embodied by the monstrous feminine into a static and passive copy of the *Venus de Milo*. If Medusa could only turn herself to stone!

Conclusion: feminine chaos

Stone and Gutiérrez-Albilla describe Buñuel as 'a thoroughbred chauvinist with a passion for embroidery' (2013: 2), and as women are prone to suffer terribly in his films, it is unsurprising that Buñuel's cinema is often labelled misogynist.[57] His female protagonists are threatened with rape (Viridiana), sexually humiliated (Séverine), and one even loses a limb to amputation (Tristana).[58] In her study of transgression in French film, Martine Beugnet suggests that we should not 'disallow the deeply sexist character of some avant-garde and neo-avant-garde films that are now canonized as classics of world cinema' (2007: 55). This is an important point – do we experience a certain kind of critical blindness when faced with a film that is 'arthouse', as opposed to mainstream? Perhaps, but be that as it may, one must also give due critical attention to the fact that Buñuel's male characters are put through their own paces under his irreverent eye. Does this film uphold old fashioned and damaging stereotypes of women as manipulative, elusive, virginal or whoreish, or does Buñuel successfully manage to subvert these clichés? Or must we return to Gutiérrez-Albilla's assertion that any hetertosexist and misogynist discourses are merely 'surface inscriptions' (2008: vii), that, once circumvented, reveal alternative subjectivities?

As we have discussed, the film's tragicomic trajectory is launched by a masculinity in crisis, posing questions about the relationship between the representation of idealised femininity and male hysteria. The bourgeois order is predicated on a false (and heteronormative) separation of male and female desire that this reading of *Cet obscur objet* via Bourgeois and other historical images has uncovered to be closely linked to — in this case — male hysteria, born of a fear of insignificance that makes desire stand in for existential fear, and fear of the monstrous feminine that leads to a desperate need to find ways to contain it. In some

[57] See Begin (2013) and Connelly and Lynd (2001).

[58] Tristana's amputation and subsequent substitution with a wooden leg, along with her eventual sexual empowerment, speaks to Bourgeois' *Couple IV* (1997), which would provide a fascinating point of comparison to the film.

ways, Bourgeois was greatly ahead of her time in this, for although she was undoubtedly preoccupied with representing her own (female, cisgendered) experience, this contained its own understanding and acceptance of the fact that she possessed both female and male drives. Pieces such as *Janus Fleuri* and *Fillette* explore an embodied, flexible sexuality that embraces both the feminine and masculine positions, and understands the importance of their coexistence; they enact a disruption of the established order by moulding binary oppositions into an integrated whole. Buñuel's Conchita represents a different kind of disruption: she is scopophilic chaos, exploding expectations in this film that is, on its surface at least, a glossy product that does not announce itself as 'surreal' or challenging. Buñuel and Bourgeois both use their art to explore the limits of desire, which is why staging an encounter between their work is so interesting.

Buñuel 'maintained that his films are just a series of visual gags as viewed in reality' (Begin 2006: 1116), but these references and associations call into question deeper truths about the nature of desire. Conchita's symbolic excess lies in her performance of other feminine archetypes, initially highlighted by the way the yonic shell imagery of her name evokes representations of Venus; Conchita the shell hosting different incarnations of woman-as-object-of-desire as they flow through the narrative, represented by the echoes of famous depictions of Venus reflected in the *mise-en-scène*. Sandro's description of Conchita as a figure of desire that is 'both the model of unattainable plenitude and a substitute object' (Sandro 1987: 147) neatly encapsulates this understanding of her as both multiple and fundamentally inadequate. Here, Buñuel's is a hysteria represented in structural and thematic elements (the terrorist attacks, the Janus-like, two-faced object of desire), all demonstrations of a menacing chaos linked to the presence of the female object of desire, which is, when not encased in clichéd representations of statue-like frigidity, a threatening presence. The recurrence of figures such as Venus and the Lacemaker show that

masculinity in crisis returns to old representations of passive femininity, perhaps finding comfort in them because they restrict and contain the chaos that is represented by Bourgeois' work and encouraged by thinkers such as Irigaray.

Returning to our evocative image of the male doctor/director/protagonist in crisis (incited by feelings of desire) manipulating the female body in order to mediate his own grief and neurosis, we must read these women not simply as examples of Creed's monstrous feminine or deceitful, hysterical representations of femininity, but as symptomatic of male hysteria, as projections of masculine hysterical convulsion. Here, woman is more than simply Irigaray's 'obliging prop' of masculine fantasy; she is symptomatic of something more extreme, inherently tied to a crisis of self brought about by the experience of desire.

Kristeva understands the lover as a figure that 'reconciles narcissism and hysteria' (1986: 250). If, as she argues, 'the lover is a narcissist with an object' (Kristeva 1986: 250), then this film may be understood as a demonstration of the way in which the hysteria of the narcissistic male lover is triggered by the presence of their *objet a*. Kristeva continues:

> As far as he is concerned, there is an idealizable other who returns his own ideal image.... In amorous hysteria, the ideal other is a reality not a metaphor.... Endowed with the sexual attributes of both parents, and by that very token a totalizing, phallic figure (1986: 250).

Mathieu is the narcissistic lover in pseudo-dialogue with audiences both intra (in the train carriage) and extra (in the cinema) diegetic, and Conchita is equivalent to 'the female body and the feminine position' that Kahane argues is 'projected in the imaginary and inscribed by the symbolic' (1995: 148) by the hysterical male narrative voice. In its fundamental excess, Mathieu's hysterical projection (Conchita as BwO) refuses the body's 'symbolic limits and laws', instead interrogating them 'through a projective other' (Kahane 1995: xi) that is both split and

excessive. Bearing in mind Buñuel's caustic sense of humour, we might also interpret the film's structure as a wry comment on the perceived narcissism and ultimate uselessness of talk therapy.[59] Ultimately, Mathieu has gone nowhere: despite travelling physically, temporally, and narratively, he has not escaped the object/product of his desire (as Conchita is, of course, on the train), and because in his narration he has not told the truth, nor has he gained any useful insight into his experiences; in actual fact, Mathieu's fellow passengers have politely validated and confirmed his perspective, never challenging him, ensuring that the patriarchal symbolic remains oblivious, self-perpetuating, and blind to its own limitations.

Figure 19: Conchita mocks Mathieu as the train pulls into Paris, its final destination.

[59] Wood describes the presence of the Freudian dwarf 'a mockery of knowingness' (1981: 339) as all he actually does is point out the obvious.

Chapter Three: Venus in Spandex

(*La piel que habito,* Pedro Almodóvar, 2011)

Introduction: the skin I live in

This chapter explores *La piel que habito* (2011)[1] with reference to violence and transgression. It provides close readings of the film that explore, firstly, links with the horror genre that Almodóvar has himself highlighted, and secondly, its representation of the transsexual female body as an abject space of violence, articulated through and structured by non-consensual violence.[2] Engaging with theories of the monstrous feminine via Kristeva, Creed, and Donna Haraway, it will build on Sánchez-Mesa's interesting thoughts on the relevance of Haraway's cyborg to this film, and investigate its relationship with the art of Bourgeois that is referenced directly in the *mise-en-scène*. This reading will also expand on the discussion of hysteria and the potentially fraught relationship between the subject and object of desire in the previous chapter.

The title of Almodóvar's eighteenth feature draws our attention to its surface with deft economy: the simple phrase 'the skin I live in' evokes many of the film's central themes and motifs. Skin alone comes laden with associations – such as nudity, identity, sexuality, performance, masquerade, the hunt, tactility – while the notion of 'living' within it emphasises a separation between the external and internal self, and introduces the film's central conflict. Additionally, it encourages a focus on the surface of both its characters and the screen itself, on which its luxurious and high production value visuals play out.

The female nude is vital to *La piel*, both in terms of narrative development and *mise-en-scène*. This is a film that interrogates identity

[1] Henceforth referred to as *La piel*.

[2] Rob White notes, 'for what must be the first time in an Almodóvar film, transsexualism has no positive valence: here it is sheer violent mutilation and the cause of torment'. http://www.filmquarterly.org/2011/10/escape-artistry-debating-the-skin-i-live-in/> [Accessed 22/2/17].

and gender, and questions the complex nature of desire, the intimate interrelationship between doctor and patient, and the objectification inherent in voyeurism, be it for scientific or sexual ends. John Berger identifies the difference between nakedness and nudity as one of objectification: 'a naked body has to be seen as an object in order to become a nude' (2008: 54). He continues, 'the nude is condemned to never being naked. Nudity is a form of dress' (Berger 2008: 54). These principles are highlighted by an opening sequence that introduces Almodóvar's mysterious protagonist, Vera (Elena Anaya), as an object of desire. Initially only a blurry outline seen through a barred window, she is then presented bent back into a pose that references the hysterical arch repeatedly depicted in Bourgeois' work, oblivious to our gaze [Figs. 1 and 2]. A closer examination reveals her seemingly naked body to be clad in a flesh coloured spandex body stocking that covers all but her face: a synthetic second skin that ensures her nakedness is literally clothed in 'nude'. This *trompe l'oeil* urges the spectator to consider what separates nudity and nakedness, and how this might relate to the inherent voyeurism of the gaze, whilst foregrounding the idealised female form's significance to the plot.

Figure 1: Vera bent into a yogic version of the *arc-en-cercle.*

Figure 2: Louise Bourgeois' *Arch of Hysteria* (1993).

This line of questioning is reinforced by the various representations of idealised, female nudes that punctuate the carefully constructed set. Two walls of plastic surgeon Dr. Robert Ledgard's (Antonio Banderas) opulent villa are dominated by enormous reproductions of Venus: Titian's *Venus of Urbino* (1538) and *Venus and Music* (1548), their extravagant size a reminder that what we are about to see is likely to be, in true Almodóvar style, 'larger than life'.[3] Titian's classical goddesses are scaled up to enormous proportions so that they fill a wall each. In reality the Urbino is 165cm x 199cm and the other 148cm x 217cm, much smaller than their dimensions on set, a deliberate excess that highlights the narrative significance of the copy or duplicate. These blown up reproductions provide a bridge between the object of desire that is literally 'blown up' in the finale of *Cet obscur objet,* Buñuel's homage to frustrated

[3] Titian's Urbino is itself a duplicate, based on Giorgione's *Sleeping Venus* (1510). As discussed in chapter two, Venus is a motif that recurs across all three films in this study, from the *Venus de Milo* and *Rokeby Venus* (also influenced by Titian's *Urbino*) references discussed in chapter two, to artist Jim Dine's sculptures that riff on that very statue, which we will come to look at in chapter four.

longing, and this story that traces another man's descent into madness in pursuit of his ideal *objet a*. In both images Venus is naked and beguiling, softly reclining in inviting, mute passivity [Figs. 3 and 4].[4]

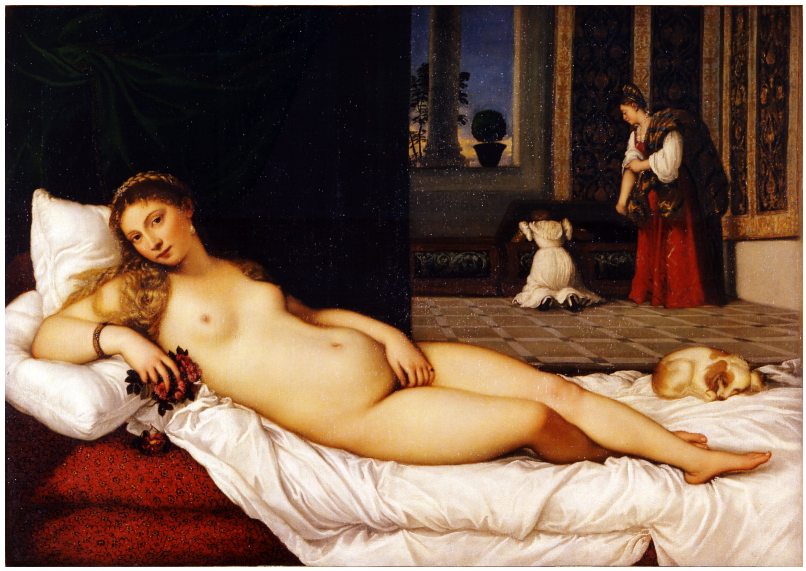

Figure 3: *Venus of Urbino*, Titian (1538)

Figure 4: *Venus and Music,* Titian (1547)

The film itself is, in fact, like Buñuel's, an augmented copy: the plot is adapted from Thierry Jonquet's *Mygale*, a French novel originally published in 1984. Questions about what happens to a work of art in the

[4] Placing these two images side by side emphasises the duplicate motif and foregrounds the idea of the artistic reproduction in a Warholian style. Poyato Sánchez notes that here, the incorporation of these Titian paintings, 'además de proporcionar el léxico plástico a las imágenes anteriores, conlleva, pues, un mimetismo entre las Venus y Vera que resalta las curvas femeninas y el erotismo carnal de la mujer' (2014: 107).

event of its reproduction posed by Walter Benjamin (2008) provide a framework for this film, which explores and imagines the way technological advancement might aid and change this process. Here, in Almodóvar's acerbic vision, the copied work of art is a human body. If Benjamin questioned the loss of a certain 'aura' in the mechanical age of reproduction, this film questions both the loss of an 'essential sex' in an age of medicinal reproduction, the status of that aura of 'sex', and what its reproduction may conceal. This chapter explores the implications of this film's assault on the dominant male gaze, the relationship of Bourgeois' work to the themes of Gothic doubles, spaces of violence, and the role of art in healing and establishing individual identity.

Synopsis

Partly told in a non-linear way in several flashbacks from the perspectives of its different protagonists, *La piel* is classic Almodóvar in the intricacy of its plot. Dr Robert Ledgard is a deranged plastic surgeon, who lives with his housekeeper, Marilia (Marisa Paredes), in an isolated mansion on the outskirts of Toledo in the traditional heart of Spain. Unbeknownst to him, Marilia is also his mother. Within the confines of this large and beautifully appointed house he has an operating theatre and scientific laboratory. Here, Ledgard performs illegal procedures and conducts his controversial research into transgenics, a scientific process that involves splicing pig skin cells together with human ones to create a hyper-durable 'superskin' that is, among other things, flame and insect-bite resistant.

Years before the narrative present, Ledgard's wife Gal committed suicide. She had become sexually involved with Marilia's outlaw son (and Ledgard's secret half-brother) Zeca (Roberto Álamo), after he turned up at the house on the run from the police. Zeca and Gal attempted to elope but their plan was thwarted by a terrible car crash in which Zeca left Gal for dead. Ledgard, however, arrived in time to rescue her, but she sustained extremely serious, disfiguring burns all over her body. After months of slow recovery at *El Cigarral*, swaddled in gauzes and marred by her injuries, Gal was reanimated by the sound of her young daughter Norma (Blanca Suárez) singing. As she followed the sound, she caught sight of her reflection in a window and, like so many grim fairytales that fixate on female beauty and its monstrous opposite, she was so horrified by her grotesque image that she jumped to her death in despair. Norma was playing in the garden below, and the psychological damage caused by witnessing her mother's suicide left her severely and permanently traumatised, in need of medication, and inpatient psychological treatment.

Years later, at one of Ledgard's client's weddings, the now young adult Norma meets a young local called Vicente (Jan Cornet). In a blackly comic exchange that problematises sexual consent, Norma and Vicente establish that they are both on drugs – although the fact that, while his

are illegal, hers are prescription, gets lost in translation. Vicente, high and horny, misunderstands Norma and assumes she is intoxicated in the same way as him. He kisses her, and she begins to neurotically remove her clothes, saying they make her feel claustrophobic. Vicente misreads this as sexual consent, and, laying her down in the undergrowth continues to try to have sex with her. Norma is vacant and passive until quite suddenly she has a hysterical response, and starts screaming. Vicente, shocked and confused, puts his hand over her mouth. She bites him, hard, and he slaps her across the face in response, knocking her out. Vicente then panics, covers up Norma's partially naked body with her dress, and flees on his motorbike.

Ledgard interprets this as attempted rape: he hears his daughter scream, but by the time he finds her unconscious body, Vicente is driving away. Ledgard wakes Norma up and on coming round she immediately has another hysterical fit, screaming in terror, clearly afraid of him: in her delirium, she believes it was her father, and not Vicente, who attacked her. Norma's psychological state is so badly damaged by the incident that she returns to the Neuropsychiatric Institute where she had received treatment after her mother's death. Enraged, Ledgard vows to exact revenge on the young biker.

With calculated precision, Ledgard disguises his face with an uncanny prosthetic mask and, driving a van, tracks down Vicente and gives chase, eventually knocking him off his motorbike. Ledgard loads Vicente and his bike into the van, kidnaps him and returns to *El Cigarral*. For a time, Ledgard keeps Vicente prisoner, chained up in an underground cave. Meanwhile, Norma's mental state deteriorates. Her father's visits send her into a hysterical state each time. In keeping with a narrative full of doubles and repetitions, Norma eventually commits suicide in the same way as her mother: by throwing herself out of a window at the psychiatric hospital.

On the day of his daughter's burial, Ledgard – deranged by a cool and purposeful anger – decides to perform a vaginoplasty on his prisoner,

Vicente. Henceforth, the newly castrated hostage becomes a guinea-pig for the surgeon's controversial research. Consequently, Ledgard moves Vicente from the cave into the main house, where he is locked in a clinical room containing a bed, shower and bathroom facilities, and a dumb waiter. Mounted high on the wall is a surveillance camera that is linked up to a series of small screens in the mansion's kitchen, so the 'patient' can be monitored at all times.

As Ledgard descends further into madness, he gradually performs a full sex change on Vicente. Over the course of six years the surgeon models his prisoner's new feminine features on those of his late wife – his desire to create a beautiful and indestructible genetically modified skin is seemingly a traumatic response to Gal's tragic fate years before. In addition, via the non-consensual gender reassignment surgery Ledgard forces on Vicente, he begins to create a female 'replacement' for both the women he has lost.[5] Ledgard covers Vicente in the futuristic skin he has successfully created, which he christens "Gal", after his wife, but perhaps also (portentously) in reference to the Greek myth of Galatea, in which the sculptor falls in love with his creation. Ledgard names his 'new' female patient Vera in an obvious play on the nature of 'true' identity, and in this context, on which side of the (artificially manipulated) skin boundary it may lie.[6]

Marilia is unsettled by Vera's resemblance to Gal, and warns Ledgard that it is unwise (she makes a comment that his patients always end up looking like her). One day, in another repetition of past events, Zeca arrives at the house, again on the run from the law. This time, he fled after a botched robbery at Bulgari where his face was caught on CCTV (yet another screen within a screen in this self-consciously self-reflexive narrative). He explodes onto the scene from a carnival in Madrid, dressed in an extravagant tiger costume and demanding refuge. Zeca ties

[5] See Alessandra Lemma (2012) for a psychoanalytic reading of Ledgard based on the repressed trauma of losing both wife and daughter.
[6] Like a bride of Frankenstein: something old (Vicente), something new (skin), something borrowed (Gal's face), something blue (her cell).

Marilia to a kitchen chair and gags her, intending to hold his mother hostage in order to force Ledgard surgically to alter his face so he can once again evade the police. He then notices Vera on the surveillance screens and immediately mistakes her for Gal. He is shocked to discover her alive, and, overcome by the 'animal' lust that is represented by his absurd costume, he breaks into Vera's prison and, unaware that he is mistaken about her identity, violently rapes her. Ledgard returns just in time to see history repeat itself on his surveillance system and rushes in with his gun drawn to find Zeca collapsed on top of Vera in a post-coital stupor.[7] After a moment of indecision, he shoots Zeca in the back.

This act of sexual violence awakens something in Ledgard, and he finally allows Vera to leave her gilded cage and live with him in the house as his lover. That night he takes her to bed and tries to instigate sex, which she gently refuses, explaining that the tiger really 'messed her up inside'. They sleep, and it is from here that more flashbacks deliver the rest of the story, including Vera's pre-operative backstory as Vicente.

In the flashback, Vicente works in his mother's vintage shop in Toledo with Cristina (Bárbara Lennie), who he fancies, but she is gay, so his desire is unrequited. Vicente is portrayed as an artistic, gentle, effeminate young man, physically small and heavily associated with feminine spaces in the *mise-en-scène*. There is a particular floral shift dress on the rail in his mother's shop that he loves, and he tries to get Cristina to wear it. Teasing, she responds that if he likes it so much he should wear it himself, a statement that becomes highly significant later on in the narrative.

Vicente talks constantly about feeling different and wanting to escape Toledo, describing the mental escape provided by the recreational drugs he takes. One of his jobs at the shop is to dress the

[7] They appear like a perverse incarnation of Botticelli's famous painting *Mars and Venus* (c.1483): although instead of representing an allegory of pleasure and sensuous love, these 'lovers' embody the potential violence of libidinous energy. Botticelli's Vespucci wasps that in the painting swarm around Mars' head are represented here, in Almodóvar's vision, by the industrious bees in Ledgard's laboratory.

windows, and, in a cruel parallel to his own impending fate, he tenderly constructs scarecrow-like figures that he adorns with dresses and jewellery. Vicente's femininity is emphasised in the *mise-en-scène* by a shot that shows him framed by the wire outline of a woman's head in profile (one of the unusual mannequins he has constructed at the shop). This image will be echoed later in the narrative by Bourgeois' drawings that, post transformation, Vera copies onto the walls of her prison [Figs. 5 and 6].

Figure 5: Vicente making figures for his mother's shop window.

Figure 6: *Self Portrait*, Louise Bourgeois (1990).

It suggests a bisexuality of the kind that Mitchell explains, in the Freudian sense, signifies 'two genders present at the same time' rather than sexual orientation (2014: 11).[8] This flashback takes us through the slow process of Vicente's gradual sex change, showing his excruciating incarceration, including moments of intense subordination, several bids to escape, and a desperate suicide attempt where he slits his own throat with a kitchen knife. The film ends back in the narrative present, in the aftermath of Vera's rape and Zeca's murder. Ledgard has promised his now ex-prisoner that she can be free in exchange for her promise that she will never leave. Vera and Marilia go into Toledo together to get Vera a wardrobe of feminine clothes now that she it seems she has fully accepted her transition.

While they are gone, a colleague of Ledgard's pays a visit and reveals that he has guessed the truth about Vicente, the young man whose vaginoplasty he assisted on six years previously. He shows Ledgard an article about missing people that features Vicente's photograph, throwing it down on the desk. Ledgard denies everything, saying that the young man in question is now very muscular, living in LA and making his fortune in the porn industry. He then pulls a gun on his accuser. At that moment, Vera appears – wearing the dress that she and Cristina joked about in the shop all those years ago – and rescues Ledgard by saying that she came to him of her own free will. She states, defiantly, that her name is Vera Cruz, 'and I always was a woman'. The man leaves, and Vera and Ledgard go to bed and start having passionate sex until Vera winces in pain.[9] She needs to get the lubricant she bought earlier, which is in her handbag downstairs. She puts on a sheer black dressing gown that billows like Dracula's cape as she descends the stairs and goes into Ledgard's office. Once there, in a sequence that references

[8] Similarly, Hustvedt describes Almodóvar's style as having 'a hermaphroditic sensibility' (2016: 43).

[9] Dongsup Jung makes an interesting point that Robert and Vera's union momentarily presents another example of Almodóvar's traditional presentation of 'the alternative family' (2014: 622).

the farcical trope of guns in handbags from *Mujeres al borde de un ataque de nervios* (1988), Vera takes Ledgard's gun from the drawer of his desk and puts it in her handbag, along with the lubricant.[10] On his desk is the newspaper with a picture of Vicente, which Vera picks up and kisses, before returning to Ledgard. Once back in the room, she takes out the gun and shoots him dead. Marilia hears the gunshot and comes to see what's going on, brandishing a gun of her own. Vera, hidden under the bed, shoots Marilia, and she also dies. Vera puts on the floral shift she wore earlier and leaves *El Cigarral* for good, taking a taxi straight to her mother's shop. Cristina comes to serve her, and Vera, overcome with emotion, explains who she is and what has happened to her. When she reminds Cristina of their conversation about the dress she is now wearing, Cristina, tearful, calls to her boss who comes to join them, asking what's wrong. Vera turns to her and whispers 'soy Vicente', the screen abruptly fades to black, and the film ends.

[10] Henceforth referred to as *Mujeres al borde*.

Resurrections and reproductions: Marina, redux

According to Jean Baudrillard, 'our entire linear and accumulative culture collapses if we cannot stockpile the past in plain view' (2016: 10), a statement that feels relevant to this film that explores our ability to re-write histories and identities and cover over old truths. *La piel*'s narrative draws attention to this by emphasising self-reflexivity from the outset.[11] Diegetically, the reproductions (of a reproduction) of Venus discussed in this chapter's introduction are displayed on various screens, creating a series of *mises-en-abîme* within the frame. They highlight the role of the gaze and what Williams calls the 'frenzy of the visible' (1999) in structuring the relationship between the subject and object of desire. The recorded image plays an important role in *La piel,* and these manipulated representations of the classical goddess may come to be seen as a shorthand for the dialectics of the gaze in general: objectified Vera is an object of perpetual observation that draws interesting, and potentially uncomfortable attention to the role of the cinema spectator.

Ledgard can, depending which screen he views, maximise or minimise Vera's image at will. At one point, in a direct homage to Titian, he uses the vast HD television in his study – a screen expressly designed for high tech display – to zoom in on Vera's reclining, 'nude' form until she is, like the reproduced paintings, larger than life [Fig. 7].[12]

[11] Smith has described it as a 'darker and more self-referential' film than its predecessors in Almodóvar's body of work (D'Lugo and Smith 2016: 131).
[12] As Hustvedt observes, 'the history of art is full of women lying around naked for erotic consumption by men. Those women are mostly unthreatening, aren't they?' (2016: 41).

Figure 7: Ledgard watches Vera in his study.

Wall-mounted in the kitchen there are also small, black and white surveillance screens that show a bird's eye view of her room at all times. Marvin D'Lugo and Kathleen Vernon note that these parallels between Titian and Ledgard encourage reflection upon the old and new ways in which we 'capture' feminine perfection (2013: 8). We might further extrapolate this to ask: why do we still feel so bound to objectify femininity in this way? This drive to deify the idealised female form – what Benjamin might refer to as 'the secular worship of beauty' (2008: 24) – is here emphatically turned onto the secular worship of the female object of desire. This incorporates the questions of commerce and exchange value that cannot be avoided in this discussion.

For the female-identifying viewer that initially aligns with Vera as the object of the male gaze, these surveillance screens make manifest the split caused by her entry into the symbolic order, a form of bisection that makes her both 'the *surveyor* and the *surveyed*' (Berger 2008: 46). As Berger famously states: 'Men look at women. Women watch themselves being looked at' (2008: 47).[13] The first half of *La piel* appeals directly to the conventional gender split in gaze theory: men can look at

[13] The title of Hustvedst (2016) is a deliberate play on Berger's phrase (*A Woman Looking at Men Looking at Women: Essays on Art, Sex, and the Mind*).

Vera, and women can look at Vera being looked at.[14] Yet, as the development of this narrative reveals, it is precisely such sexually essentialist and historically loaded viewing positions that Almodóvar seeks to disrupt.

La piel brings the question of art and its reproduction, replicas, and politics together on the controversial 'body politic' that Vera represents: as we shall see, she is a complicated replica herself. About the female nude, Nead writes:

> The framed image of a female body, hung on the wall of an art gallery, is shorthand for art more generally; it is an icon of western culture, a symbol of civilization and accomplishment (1992: 1).

Vera and Titian's images of feminine perfection stand for more than what they actually depict, and highlight the way the female form becomes a commodity with an accordant exchange value.[15] Mulvey traces this relationship between commodity fetishism and the image, explaining that 'as spectacle, the object becomes image and belief, and is secured by an erotic, rather than a religious, aura' (1996: 4).[16] In *La piel,* Vera embodies the complex interaction between erotic desire channelled through scopophilic pleasure and belief in 'the figure of woman as spectacle on the screen' (Mulvey 1996: 8). It is the film's shocking narrative twist that brings to light the politics of sexism on which the reproduction of the 'female' nude is founded.

Concluding that phallic *jouissance* is essentially masturbatory, Lacan writes that the act of love 'is the male's polymorphous perversion' (1998: 72). He identifies the quest for sexual and romantic satisfaction as ultimately solipsistic, something that offers the promise of 'oneness' but in

[14] For a discussion of queer bodies in this film see Zachary Price (2015).
[15] On the relationship between desire and capital, Baudrillard asks, 'and is it not the same for desire and the libidinal space? Conjunction of desire and value, of desire and capital' (2016: 18).
[16] Mulvey writes, 'the fetishism of the commodity is made up of spectacle and significance', stimulating a 'desire that can be realised as market-driven demand' (1996: 5).

reality always falls short, because desire is fundamentally for the unattainable: the promise of the *objet a* is false, because the *objet a* is itself mutable.[17] He explains that phallic *jouissance* is experienced through a fantasy that enables a union with a sexual object that facilitates sexual *jouissance*, rather than a genuine union with another actual partner. He differentiates between 'making love', which he describes as 'poetry' (1998: 72) and the 'act of love' – sex – which is this polymorphous perversion, that engages with the *objet a* as a sexual object in the service of gratification. So, if we, like Lacan, focus only on the male for a moment, we might see Vera as an expression of Ledgard's 'polymorphous perversion' that we come to realise is his ideal *objet a,* made up of a mangled combination of revenge, grief, desire, and love: it is absence that calls desire into being and the *objet a* that offers an illusion of respite. In *La piel,* these potent forces meet on the fragile threshold that, Georges Bataille has argued, separates sex and violence, and which, according to his heteronormative schema, consigns the feminine to the role of victim. Lacan famously states:

> Woman can only be written with a bar through it. There's no such thing as Woman, Woman with a capital *W* indicating the universal. There's no such thing as Woman because, in her essence […] she is not-whole (2001: 72-73).

This chapter explores how Vera and her body – originally male, before then being man-made through the violence of multiple plastic surgery procedures – illustrate the plurality of Ledgard's 'polymorphous perversions' and Lacan's lack: Vera, like Conchita, simultaneously represents lack and excess. As we shall discuss in more detail later on, when writing about her we need to devise a signifier that expresses and incorporates the complexity and the violence of her representation and her signification as an involuntary 's/he'.

[17] We are reminded of Carrière's assertion from chapter two that the desire of desire is to desire.

Almodóvar 'has maintained an interest in the crosscurrents of sex and violence' (P. W. Evans 2009: 101) throughout his career, but the particular violence of *La piel* shocked audiences and alienated some critics.[18] Yet no one could claim brutality was absent from Almodóvar's previous work: sexual violence is a constant, from the opening sequence of his first feature, *Pepi, Luci, Bom y otras chicas del montón* (1980) in which Carmen Maura's character is raped by a policeman.[19] These violent scenes are usually conveyed in kitsch, playfully melodramatic narratives: Almodóvar's trademark juxtaposition of the high and low, funny and tragic is internationally recognised, however *La piel* appropriates a more serious register. Dr. Ledgard's amorality personifies the brutality at the heart of this film, and the clinical examination of its director's on-going preoccupation with sexuality, violence, and masquerade. A Gothic-inflected emphasis on uncanny doubles and spaces classically associated with the horror genre, such as the mad scientist's laboratory, isolated mansion, and prison cell, contribute to Almodóvar's chillingly aesthetic, contemporary version of the Frankenstein myth.[20]

The luxurious visual texture of *La piel* is one of its notable features. Set in 2012, the action takes place one year in the future at the time of filming, a gesture that creates a temporal schism to account for the uncanny elements that are perhaps best exemplified by its seductive and digitally augmented surface. The tactility of its projection is part of what sutures the viewer to its narrative, and also to Vera, whose luminous skin it mirrors. Drawing a parallel between the skin of its central character and that of the film itself leads us to Laura Marks' text *The Skin of the Film*, where she identifies 'haptic visuality' as: 'the way vision itself can be tactile, as though one were touching a film with one's eyes' (2000: xi).

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[18] 'With the notable exception of Juan Cruz in *El País*, in general Spanish critics have been unsympathetic toward the film' (Zurian 2013: 167).
[19] For a more detailed discussion of rape in Almodóvar's cinema see Lev (2013).
[20] For more discussion of Frankenstein, with a psychoanalytic angle and focus on loss and trauma, see Lemma (2012).

This quote emphasises the importance of the skin motif and carries it over from the diegetic world to the film itself as an object of desire, its glossy surface inviting a scopophilic pleasure, as will be demonstrated in the film's texture-rich opening sequence. The power of this visual seduction is felt when the plot twist is revealed, and the audience is then forced to contemplate the horror of an object of desire that is the victim of such violation. Just as the film is not perhaps the typical Almodóvar, Vera turns out to be not the typical feminine *objet a*. This is a narrative that 'gets under your skin', and, true to the horror genre it references and emulates, it elicits a bodily reaction from the spectator: shocked gasps and murmurs make evident the violence this film does to the viewer, an iron fist in a velvet glove.[21]

Another example of the shift in Almodóvar's trademark style is the change in pitch of this film's intertextual references: throughout his career, he has laced his work with citations from other texts of all kinds, scattering clues like breadcrumbs for his loyal fans who are often fellow cinephiles. D'Lugo and Vernon observe that *La piel* features fewer 'cinematic quotes' to other directors than is customary, and that it is particularly referential to his own career (2013: 2). Here, beyond these explicit links made to his own films, Almodóvar's customary intertextual references are altogether much bleaker than usual. For example, *¡Atame!* (1989), a postmodern, blackly comic rom-com about Stockholm Syndrome, makes allusions to cult B-movie gore-fests *Invasion of the Body Snatchers* (1956) and *Night of the Living Dead* (1968). Here, these are replaced by a selection of examples laden with symbolism, from the desolate landscapes of post-apocalyptic Southern Gothic novelist Cormac McCarthy, to a Spanish translation of Alice Munro's *Runaway* (2004), to a book by Janet Frame about survival. Ledgard is reading a copy of Richard Dawkins' *The Selfish Gene* (1976), and Vera has several books about Louise Bourgeois in her cell, the significance of which we shall

[21] See Williams (1991) for a discussion of 'body genres' in film.

come to look at in detail later in this chapter.[22] By referencing McCarthy, Titian's Venus, Bourgeois, and Dawkins, Almodóvar stakes a higher intellectual claim for this film than in previous work, placing it within a different critical framework.[23]

In fact, *¡Atame!* is something of a founding text for this film. *La piel* heralds the long awaited reunion between Almodóvar and Banderas, who last worked together on *¡Atame!* in 1989. Twenty one years before playing Ledgard, a young and wildly energetic Banderas appeared as Ricky, a former psychiatric patient who kidnaps recovering drug addict Marina (Victoria Abril), an actress and ex-porn star, and holds her hostage until Stockholm syndrome appears to set in. She seems to make the transition from prisoner to lover, and from object to subject of desire. Not unlike *La piel, ¡Atame!* is a tale of surrealist-inflected *amour fou* in which the pursuit of love 'becomes an expression of the submissive/dominant or bottom/top dynamics of sadomasochistic registers of sexual attraction' (P. W. Evans 2009: 111). This leads P. W. Evans to place Almodóvar within the erotic territory marked out by writers such as Leopold von Sacher-Masoch and Pauline Réage (2009: 111), and, like Buñuel, within the tradition of the Marquis de Sade. Over the years that separate these two films, Ricky's energetic, messy, passionate, and oddly endearing psychopathy has developed into Ledgard's cold, dispassionate psychosis in a manner that reflects the evolution in Almodóvar's cinematic style.

In some ways, *La piel* picks up where *¡Atame!* leaves off. It explores what might happen if Marina's Stockholm syndrome were in fact a sham, part of a long, tactical game so that, in keeping with the tradition

[22] This calls to mind the moment in Buñuel's *Un chien andalou* when the male protagonist has two books in his hands that in the blink of an image are replaced with two pistols – a comment on the potential for books and the ideas contained within them to catalyse violence.

[23] Domingo Sánchez-Mesa notes the inclusion of Munro's *Runaway* in Vera's book collection. Munro won the Nobel Prize for literature in 2013, and by including her book in the *mise-en-scène*, Almodóvar introduces subtle anticipatory clues that underline the active role of literature in the accoutrements of Vera's narrative (Sánchez-Mesa 2014: 175).

of the *femme fatale*, she might finally use seduction to seize her freedom. Picking up on themes encountered in the previous chapter's discussion of male hysteria, this film encourages an examination of the dialectical relationship between captor and prisoner, doctor and patient, director and protagonist, and film and audience.[24] Almodóvar is, for P. W. Evans, 'a cinematic poet of fantasy – and of the pain and pleasure of sexual desire' (2009: 116), but he is also a master of the melodrama of relationships. It is the tensions and complexities that emerge in the interdependence between different characters, the subtle but important power shifts, that give dynamism to his narratives. In *La piel*, after all this time, it seems Almodóvar grants Vera the revenge he denies Marina.

The final scene of *¡Atame!* shows Ricky and Marina literally driving off into the sunset (with Marina's sister Lola, played by Loles León), singing along to an upbeat pop song called *Resistiré* by Dúo Dinámico. It translates as, 'I will endure', or perhaps more elegantly as 'I will survive'. The lyrics include lines such as, 'soy como el junco que se dobla, pero siempre sigue en pie' and 'me volveré de hierro para endurecer la piel', which reads retrospectively like a premonition of Ledgard's sci-fi experiments in the field of transgenics. They seem to foreshadow Banderas' return as the mad surgeon, with Vera, his human lab rat, who bends but does not break, biding her time until she can emerge triumphant. In *¡Atame!*'s emotive final scene, these lyrics prompt viewers to wonder if Marina's tears are of joy, or if this is in fact an ending about compromise and making the best of a bad situation. If we re-interpret this scene in the light of Almodóvar's tendency to repeat his own narratives, we might even allow ourselves to read this as a prequel to *La piel*, with Marina, the object of desire, preparing to endure a life with Ricky, pretending to reciprocate his feelings so that she might gain some small agency, before waiting twenty-one years to reincarnate as Vera, when she can finally seek her revenge.

[24] Foucault notes that confession, which he argues lies at the heart of 'the true discourse on sex' has spread to other relationships, including those of 'students and educators, patients and psychiatrists, delinquents and experts' (1998: 63).

Smith comments on the 'entropy of ageing that surgeons and cineastes alike seek in vain to vanquish' (2014: 204), drawing a parallel between Almodóvar and Ledgard that contains echoes of the relationship between Buñuel and Mathieu outlined in the previous chapter. In *Cet osbcur objet,* Mathieu delivers his story verbally. Here, Ledgard the plastic surgeon is a corporeal storyteller, crafting new narratives out of his patients' skin, godlike in his ability to re-shape what once would have been incontrovertible truths. Just as Mathieu edits the tale he tells his fellow passengers, Ledgard literally – and without consent – overwrites the reality of his relationship to Vera by surgically superimposing a new identity onto her body, irreparably transforming her reality. In both films, a dominant male manipulates an object of desire coded onscreen as female. Smith proclaims 'a newly Proustian melancholy' (2014: 204) for *La piel*, a perspective shared by D'Lugo and Vernon, who note its focus on ageing and 'the self-conscious construction of identity that the skin surgeon, like the filmmaker, proffers' (2013: 2).

The kidnap narrative further relates *La piel* and *¡Atame!*, but here 1990's irreverence has been replaced with Gothic futurism. If *¡Atame!* is 'a detached postmodernist version of horror, playfully deploying, through humour and hyperbole […] the conventions of the genre' (P. W. Evans 2009: 109), then *La piel* is its colder, darker sibling. *¡Atame!* combines its horror elements with those of the goofball romantic comedy, but *La piel* lacks much of the subversive humour that usually underwrites acts of violence in Almodóvar's cinema. In an interview with *El País,* the director himself described it as 'the darkest film' he has ever written, and it's true that the viewer is left with little respite from the atrocities playing out onscreen.[25] Accustomed to the warmth and generosity of films like *Mujeres al borde* and *Volver* (2006), the lack of humanity at *La piel*'s narrative heart is one of the main criticisms levelled by reviewers.

[25] Almodóvar in Harguidney, A. S. 'El abismo Almodóvar', *El País*, 21/08/11 <http://elpais.com/diario/2011/08/21/eps/1313908015_850215.html> [Accessed 3/3/17].

The ‘un-pleasure’ of trauma and horror

La piel is a horror movie delivered in the stylish visual vernacular of Almodóvar’s auteurist vision. It revels in the discord between the smooth surface of its image and the turbulence of its subject matter. The many *mises-en-abîme* create an atmosphere of self-reflexion on the process of film making that, like the body undergoing surgery, the ‘insides’ of the film itself end up being exposed. If these ‘insides’ are the power of the frame and the construction of objects of desire, then Almodóvar takes us behind the curtain and deconstructs the desirous object. This supposed ‘baring all’ is paralleled by Juan Gatti’s poster for the film, which shows an anatomical illustration of a body with its skin peeled off [Fig. 8].

Figure 8: Juan Gatti’s teaser poster (2011).

Dr. Ledgard's inscrutable expression intimidates and distances the viewer, embodying the coldness and cruelty that characterise the plot.[26] Smith laments 'the fact that the *enjoyable* Almodóvar trademarks have gone missing' (original emphasis), and describes the result as a 'visual un-pleasure'.[27] This 'un-pleasure' is directly related to the plot twist, which troubles the usually enjoyable aspects of the way Almodóvar represents his leading women. We shall focus on this here with reference to the history of the female nude. The tension between the finely tuned visual gratification of an exquisite surface and the un-pleasure that increases as more narrative and structural discrepancies emerge is subtly disturbing for the viewer. Unlike in his previous work, this time Almodóvar does not invite us in to enjoy and be a part of the narrative, but rather stages his own form of kidnap, an assault that seems particularly designed to attack the still dominant male gaze.

La piel features nothing as unequivocal as Buñuel's Freud-in-miniature, but its emphasis on ways to heal from traumatic experiences nevertheless encourages its interpretation as a psychological text ripe for deconstruction and analysis.[28] As the ghosts of other objects of desire resound onscreen, the spectator is once again cast as therapist, tasked with interpreting the unconscious of Ledgard's (and Almodóvar's) neurotic arc as it spills out. In turn, this non-linear narrative development mimics the psychotherapeutic process, in which memories and hidden truths are revealed in a manner not governed by chronology. It also adds a thriller quality to the plot, enhancing the potency of its shocking narrative twist.[29]

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[26] Almodóvar states, 'I wanted to drain his face of expressivity and leave him totally aseptic and detached, a blank facade' (Delgado 2011: 20).
[27] 'Escape Artistry: Debating *The Skin I Live In*', *Film Quarterly* (no date) < http://www.filmquarterly.org/2011/10/escape-artistry-debating-the-skin-i-live-in/> [Accessed 3/3/17].
[28] Whether therapist, hypnotist, or audience, there must always be an interlocutor for the unconscious to be able to reveal itself.
[29] Unlike the carefully constructed narrative delivered chronologically in the train carriage by Buñuel's Mathieu, which is all about control. Here, no single character has control over the delivery of the narrative 'truth'.

The performance of the self, its potential for fluidity, and the impossibility of grasping essential truths about people is a theme Almodóvar returns to frequently in his work. His narratives present audiences with complex characters that demonstrate ambiguous motives, require a certain amount of analysis, and don't always tell the truth. Smith describes *La piel* as 'a kind of echo chamber, resounding with acoustic memories' (2014: 202-3), and draws a parallel between its structure and Ledgard's obsession by describing how Almodóvar 'stitches together familiar film fragments to make a wholly new text'. This stitching motif provides a metaphorical bridge to the last moments of *Cet obscur objet*, and its close up on a woman sewing together a piece of torn lace that references Johannes Vermeer's *Lacemaker* (proof that it, too, is an echo chamber of sorts). This acquires extra significance in the context of this film with its emphasis on surgical sutures, deconstruction/reconstruction, and macabre human collage. Almodóvar appears to extend *La piel*'s luxurious surface to encase his entire body of work, reaching around his films like the protective walls of Ledgard's villa. It encourages a self-reflexive performance that might highlight the true essence of his own cinema – a therapeutic investigation of the self that mirrors Vera in her search for truth. It is as if, with this film, Almodóvar encases his entire body of work in its luxurious surface, reaching it around his other films like the protective walls of *El Cigarral*, confirming (and protecting) his own auteurist citadel. Now that we have established the speculative reverberations of *¡Atame!* and the self-reflexivity of the multiple screens focussing on Vera's body, we will examine the film's opening sequence to explore the way this film brings into question society's on-going fascination with framing the female nude.

Openings and narrative arcs

La piel begins with a fade-in to an establishing shot of Toledo, deliberately framed as a visual quote of Buñuel's *Tristana* (1970), which famously begins with a corresponding image of exactly the same view [Figs. 9 and 10].

Figure 9: The opening shot of *La piel.*

Figure 10: The opening shot of Buñuel's *Tristana* (1970).

Almodóvar explains his decision to begin with this Buñuelian homage:

> I remembered a lovely long shot of Toledo from *Tristana*, where Buñuel introduces the city. As I know many of the team who

> worked with him on the film, I asked where they placed the camera, and created the same shot. Film is a living thing for me and, as I'm realising my films, these references are always full of meaning for me' (Almodóvar in Delgado 2011: 22).

For viewers familiar with the earlier film, however, this may function as a red herring by insinuating the abuse by an older male of a younger female charge.[30] Like the earlier film, the theme of entrapment is suggested by the way the forbidding Alcázar and Gothic cathedral are hemmed in by ancient battlements foregrounding the enclosed spaces that are the key to this film's *mise-en-scène.*[31] As the apian strings scored by Alberto Iglesias become more urgent, an aerial shot of the house is like the city itself in miniature: another walled collection of fortified buildings, its hexagonal shapes evocative of an industrious beehive and its isolation emphasised by the dense woodland that surrounds it. A close-up of traditional tiles announces the name of this house, *El Cigarral,* then a slow pan to the left reveals an intercom and a large black barred gate, reinforcing the prison motif. In place already are the elements that constitute that archetypal space of eroticised violence and abuse of power: the Sadean palace, which is also familiar to viewers of Buñuel's films as a wealthy, isolated location with a clearly delimited perimeter.[32]

In a single cut, the camera jumps from one set of bars to another, this time across a window, the white pains of which serve to reinforce a feeling of entrapment as they create a grid with the gate's black bars, through which a flesh-coloured figure doing exercises can just be made out. The next cut penetrates the walls of this private fortress, and we find ourselves faced with a close-up of a futuristic camera mounted high on a

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[30] As discussed in the previous chapter, Fernando Rey plays *Don Lope* in *Tristana*. There is scope to extend this conversation about female monstrosity to discuss *Tristana*, and it would be interesting to look at it in conjunction with some of Bourgeois' work, in particular sculptures such as *Couple IV* (1997) and *Knife Figure* (2002), which look at amputation and attached appendages.

[31] On entrapment in *Tristana,* Partridge writes, 'everyone in Buñuel's film is locked into geography, bounded by authority, surrounded by the constraining walls of history and forced into implacable social rituals' (1995: 208).

[32] Buñuel is also a member of this lineage – see Wood (1993) and Manuel López Villegas (1998).

wall like an all-seeing eye, emphasising the narrative presence of what Smith calls a Foucauldian 'hypervisuality' (online resource).[33] A slow zoom out reveals a figure rendered androgynous by its pose, draped purposefully over a sofa arm in a strong arch, seemingly nude, but on closer inspection clothed in a flesh-coloured bodysuit [Fig. 1]. The diegetic function of this uncanny garment is to protect Ledgard's ground-breaking (but illegal) research into transgenics.

This sequence of abrupt cuts sharply focuses attention on the female nude, simultaneously appealing to and exposing the male gaze and its traditional desire for images of vulnerable, naked women. Set up to tease the viewer and expose them to their own voyeurism, this opening wets the appetite and builds anticipation with its partial shots and blurred images – it is almost another eight minutes before Almodóvar finally grants a view of Vera actually naked, and even then s/he is still mediated by the giant LED screen that fills a wall of Ledgard's office: a semi-naked feminine body screened by a screen within a screen.

For now, let us return to the striking image of Vera posed on the sofa, bent into what emerges as a quotation of Bourgeois' sculpture, *Arch of Hysteria* (1992).[34] In stark contrast with the shiny bronze of Bourgeois' piece, Vera is lit so that the contours of her body cast sharp, sculptural shadows in painterly tones, the surface of her body uniformly matte in texture because of the bodysuit. Here, Almodóvar's palette is muted compared to the bawdy colour schemes of films such as classics like *Mujeres al borde, Todo sobre mi madre* (1999) and *Volver*. Instead, the tones and textures of this *mise-en-scène* evoke the rich, chiaroscuro style of Dutch masters such as Vermeer (who Buñuel also references). In this scene, the flat, matte grey-blue of the wall behind Vera's stretching body contrasts gently with the rich, moss green of the velvet sofa and a pale,

[33] Smith in interview with White < http://www.filmquarterly.org/2011/10/escape-artistry-debating-the-skin-i-live-in/> [Accessed 3/3/17].
[34] A recurring subject for Bourgeois, she made drawings as well as sculptures, which Kate Macfarlane describes as showing a 'bodily dislocation' (2014: 7) that applies to this narrative too.

shiny lino floor, highlighting the importance of contrasting textures onscreen in this film that is so much about skin and surface, tactility and sensation.

Slow and lascivious, the camera moves over the enigmatic figure, panning left to right to take in shins, knees, thighs, slowly moving up to the pubis and scanning along the ribs and breasts. This attention to detail shows us more of the suit's features, including zips under the breasts, hinting at the surgical seams that we later discover to be underneath.[35] The only parts of the face visible are the eyes and, so at this point the figure remains androgynous. With almost self-conscious voyeurism, the camera allows us to appraise the (thus far) anonymous body fully from every angle, like a magician turning his pockets inside out to 'prove' the magic of his trick: this body we think we have understood turns out to harbour a disturbing secret.

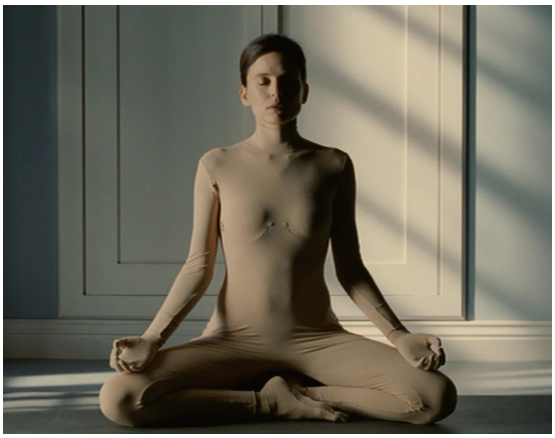

Figure 11: Vera meditating in her cell.

Now sitting in the lotus position, Vera presents as more definitively female [Fig. 11]. In close up her face is lit from the left so that its right side is in darkness. A sharp shadow carves a surgical line down the centre of her features hinting at her dual nature, which begins to make sense once we learn that she is Dr. Ledgard's mysterious prisoner/patient.[36] If this

[35] Smith draws one of many parallels with *Kika* (1993) (2014: 203).
[36] This also recalls the poster for *Ana*, another image of a woman's face partly in shadow to suggest multiple identities.

opening sets the self-reflexive and voyeuristic focus on what appears to be a female nude, the narrative arc then works to undermine this effect.

Vera/veracity: multiple truths

Once Vera's sex and gender-based complexity and sinister backstory have been made clear, the spectator understands that the 'veracity' of this character lies in their multiplicity. Vera is the offspring of Ledgard's monstrous womb – the laboratory and operating theatre in the bowels of his mansion – born cumulatively of his desire for vengeance, his scientific curiosity, and an obsessive attempt to correct the past trauma of his wife's betrayal and eventual death: she is made up of the body of a man he considers his daughter's attempted rapist transformed into an homage to and replica of his dead, adulterous wife, but genetically modified so as to be impervious to the fire that damaged her body so badly that she killed herself.[37] Unsurprisingly, then, Vera is not an integrated figure. Her new skin has the name of Ledgard's lost *objet a*, "Gal", emphasising it as a separate entity from the body it contains, a literal skin suit that is not incorporated into the whole. Spiritually and internally, however, she remains Vicente. Physically, she is Vera, a 'new' woman crafted by the surgeon's blade. Each of these elements corresponds to Ledgard's multifaceted desires: Gal (the skin) represents the object of scientific curiosity; Vicente the victim of revenge; Vera the hand crafted sex doll – a signifier related to a plurality of signifieds. Anaya's physical presence onscreen is the umbrella that draws these disparate elements together into a package of high-definition feminine perfection.

Vera's multiplicity is an important factor in a film that explores the complex territory of gender identity and its relationship to the biological/surgical body by pushing it to its darkest and most extreme limits. Through Vera, the narrative imagines the worst possible abuse of this Promethean task. As a result, it is important to acknowledge this complexity in any analysis by representing Vera's multiplicity on the page.

[37] This plot point echoes Buñuel's *Viridiana* (1961), in which Don Jaime, in a similar act of repetition through substitution, attempts to transform the young Viridiana (Catherine Deneuve) into a reincarnation of his dead wife. It also casts Gal as yet another monstrous double, utterly abject in appearance (post-car crash) with her skin boundary literally melting: a monstrosity too grotesque to live with.

Here, we propose that the most effective way to highlight this is to use a composite and 'interrupted' pronoun. From here on, this discussion will use the pronouns s/he and he/r to describe Vera, in order to make it clear that he/r transsexual identity is not the result of elected gender confirmation surgery, as is often the case in Almodóvar's films. Because it is forced upon he/r, it renders he/r body itself the site of a violence that plays out as structural and political as well as physical, suspending he/r, like Bourgeois' sculpture, in between two opposing sexed states. In 's/he', the 's' also stands for the extra layer of skin laid on top of a masculine body/identity, and the 'r' in 'he/r' symbolises Vicente's castration.

Consequently, the significance of Vera's faux-nude bodysuit becomes clearer: it is a straightforward embodiment of Berger's statement that 'nudity is a form of dress' (2008: 54), a knowing decoy for the second layer of 'nudity' that lies beneath it – the skin, 'Gal', itself. Vera's 'naked truth' has been permanently altered – by a literal castration that enacts Lacanian theories of lack – and covered over by the repressive, constructed nudity of the archetypal female object of desire. Here, the surgeon's three-dimensional 'perfect woman' is a living doll crafted by the calculated violence of his blade in a process of cutting and suturing that mimics the (pre-digital) editing of a film itself. Not only is Ledgard Almodóvar's contemporary Geppetto, a Dr. Frankenstein for the modern era, but also a representation of the godlike power of the director himself.[38] Vera's bodysuit also enables some freedom from gender as a performance, creating a neutral territory between the two sexed identities and the two most dominant gender identities of masculine and feminine. Ledgard tries to encourage Vera to perform he/r gender in the traditional way by supplying he/r with make up and floral dresses, both of which s/he vehemently rejects.

The 'truth' is that all screened bodies are composites, made up of the actor's real life body, the version projected onscreen, the script,

[38] 'What better image of the filmmaker, splicing footage together to make a seamless, but uncanny, whole?' (Smith 2014: 204).

separately recorded sound, director's instructions, DOP's framing and so on. Vera's representation encourages reflection on the nature of filmed experience itself, and on the way that it is fundamentally tied to replicas and reproductions both visually and temporally. In his analysis of reproduction in art, Benjamin calls cinema 'the most serviceable vehicle of this new understanding' (2008: 25). All types of screened images (be these captured cinematically or on surveillance cameras) are replicas, distorted reflections of our world and experiences.[39] Vera embodies the talismanic function of the female nude that must bear the weight of so many disparate meanings, constantly reproduced. In 1989, Feminist art collective Guerrilla Girls made their first poster highlighting the imbalance in representation of the nude in art, stating that less than 5% of the artists in the Modern Art section of the Metropolitan Museum of Art were women but 85% of the nudes were female. They updated the poster in 2005, when the statistics were 3% and 83% respectively, and then again in 2012 [Fig. 12], demonstrating that although some progress appears to have been made, it is, in reality, very slight.[40]

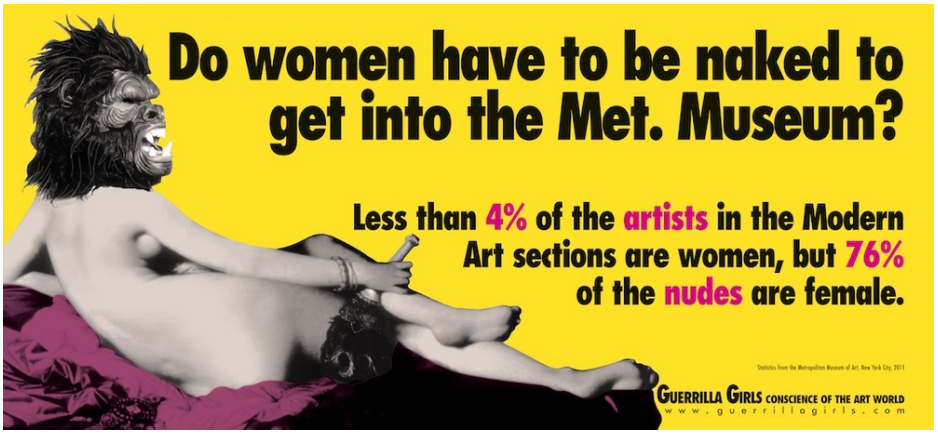

Figure 12: A Guerrilla Girls poster from 2012.

[39] On film, Benjamin writes: 'The function of film is to train human beings in the apperceptions and reactions needed to deal with a vast apparatus whose role in their lives is expanding almost daily' (2008: 26).
[40] < http://www.guerrillagirls.com/naked-through-the-ages> [Accessed 2/3/17].

We shall now turn our attention to the spaces that, in this film, frame this so-called nude, in an analysis of the concentric spaces of violence that surround Vera in he/r captivity.

Gothic spaces of horror: a modern-day Sadean palace

Having discussed the importance of an establishing sequence that sets a tone of claustrophobia, let us know look at these individual spaces of oppression in greater detail. Through the use of a sequential zoom, the first one minute and thirty-six seconds of *La piel* introduce the viewer to the different spaces of violence that I wish to examine more closely here: the house itself, and within it, the operating theatre; Vera's cell; and finally, Vera's body. This sequence emphasises the way each space fits into the other, in a kind of "Russian doll effect": this is a series of spaces of violence contained within spaces of violence, with an eventual focus on the final layer that reveals the smallest 'doll', Vera he/rself.[41] As noted by Smith, the doll is the ultimate uncanny symbol, and a motif loved by the surrealists.[42] For Peter Webb, the prominence of the doll in surrealist discourse proves one of the movement's 'less understood rules: that the highest poetic charge is generated by an elementary but decisive switch in the identity of familiar things' (2006: 35). In *La piel*, Almodóvar uses his 'living doll' to exploit this 'poetic charge' to great effect, and he/r monstrosity lies in the fact that s/he is little more than an outer female shell, brutally imposed on Vicente who remains trapped inside, a bird in the ultimate gilded cage.

As established, a change in visual style reflects Almodóvar's new, Gothic direction. Gone are the chaotic, vibrant colours and cluttered sets of his earlier films, replaced by a slicker, darker aesthetic. He asked his long-time collaborator, cinematographer José Luis Alcaine, to create 'a density, glow and darkness' to reflect the Gothic tone of the piece.[43]

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[41] The use of doll imagery again picks up on the image of Irigaray's 'obliging prop' – an inanimate object to be manipulated at will (1985: 25); White points out the 'haunting dimension of becoming-inhuman (vampire, alien, ghost, doll)' in this film: <http://www.filmquarterly.org/2011/10/escape-artistry-debating-the-skin-i-live-in/> [Accessed 26/1/17]. For a comprehensive discussion of the doll as uncanny symbol see Webb (2006).

[42] <http://www.filmquarterly.org/2011/10/escape-artistry-debating-the-skin-i-live-in/> [Accessed 25/2/17].

[43] < http://www.telegraph.co.uk/culture/film/filmmakersonfilm/8695522/Pedro-Almodovar-interview-for-The-Skin-I-Live-In.html> [Accessed 3/3/17].

Nevertheless, and displaying his inclination towards a postmodern eclecticism, Almodóvar's horror/thriller hybrid is not only gender-bending but genre-bending. Smith describes it as 'horror with the Almodovarian stamp' (2014: 203), while Maria Delgado calls it 'a brand of horror bereft of gore, with elements of melodrama, *noir*, sci-fi and black humour thrown into the mix' (2011: 18).[44] Francisco Zurian identifies 'aspects of the thriller, *film noir,* science fiction in its medical version, and psychological terror', noting its exploration of 'extremes of vengeance, abuse of power, madness, amorality, and unhealthy passion' (2013: 262). A horror movie that pushes his usual exploration of gender as masquerade to its most sinister extreme – Almodóvar says, 'maybe it's just a horror movie my way'.[45]

For Creed, the horror genre is a demonstration of 'abjection at work' (1993: 10). She explains:

> The horror film signifies a desire not only for perverse pleasure (confronting sickening, horrific images being filled with terror/desire for the undifferentiated) but also a desire, once having been filled with perversity, taken pleasure in perversity, to throw up, throw out, eject the abject (from the safety of the spectator's seat)' (1993: 10).

The 'abjection at work' in *La piel,* however, comes in a subtler guise. This horror movie 'Almodóvar's way' does not force its audience to confront straightforwardly 'sickening, horrific images' of the kind listed above, but rather gradually reveals to the viewer a series of horrifying acts and scenarios —of kidnap, imprisonment, and rape— that are in themselves abject acts. Transgressive acts such as these 'bring about an encounter between the symbolic order and that which threatens its stability' (Creed 1993: 11), a threat represented by the female body. Here, Ledgard's transgressive acts trouble the border between good and evil: he

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[44] Stone highlights the link between the *noir* femme fatale and surrealism (1998: 175).

[45] Pedro Almodóvar in interview with David Gritten in *The Telegraph* < http://www.telegraph.co.uk/culture/film/filmmakersonfilm/8695522/Pedro-Almodovar-interview-for-The-Skin-I-Live-In.html> [Accessed 3/3/17].

contravenes the symbolic borders of the physical and metaphysical, demonstrating a profound disregard for civil legality when he kidnaps Vicente and shoots Zeca. His research into transgenics involves crossing into the forbidden scientific territory of experimentation on human beings, stepping into the ethically dubious role of human demigod.

Most importantly, he creates Vera, whose existence threatens 'the border which separates those who take up their proper gender roles from those who do not' (Creed 1993: 11). There are fewer confrontations with the 'array of bodily wastes such as blood, vomit, saliva, sweat, tears, and putrefying flesh' (1993: 10) that Creed identifies as classic horror tropes than one might expect from a film of that genre. In fact, the luxurious visuals and heavily stylised characterisation of *La piel* echo the vernacular of advertisements for high-end designer scents, providing an uncomfortable contrast with the film's narrative violence. And when abject bodily fluids do appear, they are presented either in a highly stylised or highly sanitised way, as, for example, in Ledgard's laboratory, or the melodramatic image of the blood-soaked red quilt on Vera's bed after Ledgard shoots Zeca in the back.

Pavlović describes the horror film's focus as the body and its 'crude materiality: skin, muscles, bones, hair, eyes, viscera and so on' (2004: 141). *La piel*'s title emphasises the importance of these to its plot, and proffers the body as a space that can be inhabited as opposed to something intrinsically connected to the self, a space with limits that can be transgressed and invaded: a lair *for* the self as opposed to a layer *of* the self. In this film, it is Vera's body (the smallest Matryoshka doll) that is the site of this gradually revealed horror. S/he embodyies the point at which the uncanny and the abject meet: s/he is the Gothic 'trapped' woman that Almodóvar manipulates to such original effect by inverting he/r gender. As Creed states when discussing feminine monstrosity, 'it would appear that the uncanny and the abject share common features for the uncanny also disturbs identity and order' (1993: 54). What could be

more disturbing to identity and order than this uncanny, life size doll, who is perversely both object of desire and victim of terrible violence?

Gothic plot elements and explicit visual references gesture backwards to Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein; or, The Modern Prometheus* (1818), another infamous tale of a mad scientist who creates a monster in secret. Almodóvar, however, reconfigures the 19th century Sadean or Gothic palace/torture chamber aptly enough for the 21st century as the plastic surgeon's operating theatre, stating explicitly that he wanted Ledgard's laboratory to have 'a Gothic touch' (Delgado 2011: 20). Within this lair, he places a monstrous protagonist who, like the film director himself, will become an author of the female body. As in *Frankenstein*, here the monstrosity of the creation is mirrored in that of the doctor who creates it: Vera may be monstrous in that s/he is a hybrid creature 'not of woman born', but he/r psychopathic creator is rendered equally monstrous by his demonic desire for violent revenge. These sadistic undertones are similarly evoked by Vera's bodysuit, which calls to mind sado-masochistic practices of sensory deprivation. It echoes the latex or leather second skins worn by 'gimps', sexual submissives who voluntarily submit themselves to being locked up inside a bondage suit that conceals their identity and disconnects them from their senses, blocking eyes, ears, and even airwaves [Fig. 13].

Figure 13: A classic bondage or 'gimp' suit.

Like the gimp, Vera is granted no agency but is forced to hand h/er will over to h/er 'master'. This act of total submission forces the journey from subject to object, which is one of the functions of the gimp suit, a symbolic and literal relinquishment of all control leading to total reliance upon the other for survival.

In the transformation from subject to object, we find another parallel with Charcot and his captive hysterics. As specimens of medical curiosity, they are, of course, objectified – within the frame of scientific discovery, they are observed and recorded with a voyeurism that treads the boundary between the sexual, the scientific, and the gratuitous exercise of power: as Baudrillard wrote, 'the confinement of the scientific object is equal to the confinement of the mad and the dead' (2016: 9). Showalter quotes a scathing account given by scientist Madame S. V. Kovalevskaia after a visit to the Salpêtrière, which illustrates the lack of agency these women had while they were under Charcot's observation, and the extent to which they were treated like objects:

> [Charcot] relates to them extremely unceremoniously; it never enters his head whether they feel things or not. He examines them, sounds their chests, exposes their ailments to the gaze of the students just as indifferently as if he were doing it to a mannequin (1997: 52).

The use of the word 'mannequin' in this description immediately recalls an image of Ledgard layering the skin he has 'grown' onto the headless body of a mannequin in his laboratory (and also the image of the Matryoshka doll). The emotional detachment with which he treats Vera before s/he fully embodies a feminine archetype contrasts sharply with his attitude once s/he begins to accept not just he/r sex change but the performance of he/r new gender as well. The tenor of Ledgard's interest in Vera evolves along with he/r changing physiology. Vera's flashback to he/r previous life as Vicente demonstrates the extent of he/r full transformation, showing us the different stages s/he goes through in he/r

transition from masculine to feminine. Initially, he/r head is shaved, and s/he is dressed in a black bodysuit with a white plastic mask to protect he/r face, as in publicity posters for the film that emphasise he/r uncanny, doll-like quality. At this point, Ledgard's interest in he/r is distant: he treats h/er with the cool detachment of a scientist observing his experiment or a doctor their patient. As he/r hair slowly grows back and s/he begins to look more traditionally feminine, his attitude towards he/r changes. He switches he/r black bodysuit to nude, representing the shift in his attention towards her, and a change that signals he/r change in status from a body with female sex organs to an embodiment of the female nude.

Vera, however, is not the only character with a 'monstrous' second skin. Ledgard's work as a surgeon stages a sanitised encounter with the abject body, and as such requires its own protective layer: blue scrubs, latex gloves, surgical masks, all accoutrements fetishised by the camera, which, in Vicente's surgery scene, slowly pans over the various sterilised surgical instruments [Fig. 14].[46]

Figure 14: Ledgard scrubs up, putting on his surgical 'second skin'.

[46] It treats these surgical implements with the same fetishistic curiosity that it mapped Vera's body in the film's opening sequence.

Then there is Zeca, whose tiger skin tail is topped by the head of a penis to go with his 'kinky tiger-face codpiece' [Fig. 15].[47] He explodes into the narrative like the return of the repressed, a Freudian joke embodying the unfettered libido no longer relegated to the unconscious. When he first sees Vera on Ledgard's surveillance screen and assumes that she is Gal somehow returned from the dead, he licks her image in an act of unrestrained, visceral desire. This hungry tiger then crashes through the series of prisons (set up by his surgeon half-brother) to feast on his prey.

Figure 15: Zeca and Vera's second skins, shed and ripped open during the rape scene.

Such a vision of desire unbound dramatises Bataille's theory that 'underlying eroticism is the feeling of something bursting, of the violence accompanying an explosion' (2006: 93) and enacts his reactionary interpretation of erotic desire that perennially casts the female as 'victim'. His reactionary theory argues that women 'put themselves forward as objects for the aggressive desire of men' (Bataille 2006: 131), and Zeca embodies this kind of toxic masculinity that views all women as objects,

[47] < http://www.filmquarterly.org/2011/10/escape-artistry-debating-the-skin-i-live-in/> [Accessed 28/2/17].

little more than potential victims that are 'asking for it'.[48] He leaps on Vera and wrestles her to the ground beneath the impassive gaze of Titian's two Venuses, ripping open her bodysuit before ripping open her body.[49] As has been acknowledged by critics, this sequence is a perverse homage to the rape scene in *Kika,* but this act of unbridled sexual violence acquires another layer of brutality when we discover that it was Vera's first sexual contact since he/r vaginoplasty.[50]

The cruel irony of Zeca's extra penis is also particularly resonant as he violates Vera, as though Vicente's castrated appendage has re-appeared attached to his rapist. In a description particularly applicable here, Hustvedt outlines carnival as:

> The world upside down, the topsy-turvy realm of inversions and reversals, in which the mask serves as not only disguise but revelation. Political power and authority are turned into pathetic jokes; sexual desire runs rampant (2016: 14).

If, as Bataille asserts, 'eroticism shows the other side of a façade of unimpeachable propriety' (2006: 109), then Zeca and Ledgard are opposite sides of the same coin: the restrained surgeon living, on the surface at least, a life of 'unimpeachable propriety' while his outlaw sibling embodies the 'parts of the body and habits we are normally ashamed of' that live 'behind the façade' (Bataille 2006: 109). Zeca personifies the unbridled Freudian id. Ledgard, instead of remaining in his super-ego position, transgresses, and as a result incorporates the id's desire for

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[48] And exemplary of the kind of beliefs Medem will attempt to question via his character Linda in *Ana*, as we shall see in the following chapter.
[49] See Leora Lev (2013: 203) for her thoughts on how 'Almodóvar's representations of rape dismantle and critique, rather than espouse, gender essentialism'.
[50] As noted by Smith, the rape is 'copied almost shot by shot from *Kika*' < http://www.filmquarterly.org/2011/10/escape-artistry-debating-the-skin-i-live-in/> [Accessed 10/04/13].

Vera, instigating his own fall. In this way Ledgard and Zeca are another example of the Gothic doubling that is so prevalent in this film.[51]

Dr. Victor Frankenstein and his monster are perhaps the most famous pair of Gothic doubles, and Almodóvar himself confirms the references to Shelley's characters:

> ¿Frankestein? Es obvio que está ahí, pero acabada resuenan más los ecos a mitos griegos como Prometeo, el titán que robó la luz a los dioses para dársela a los humanos. Aquí la transgénesis es la luz de Prometeo, o la electricidad con la que Mary Shelley daba la vida en *Frankenstein*. La ciencia nos va a llevar a caminos y nos va a asomar a abismos que aún no conocemos; el arte nos acompañará en este viaje a nuestro lado (in Belinchón 2011).[52]

The myth of Prometheus is as relevant to *La piel* as it is to *Frankenstein*; in pursuing their unorthodox scientific research, both Ledgard and Dr. Frankenstein attempt to play God, which, as we know from the myth, is an act that never goes unpunished.

We might consider *La piel* as an apt example of the way art may combine with science to reveal the 'abysses' Almodóvar talks about. What is more, the mythical trope links Ledgard and pre-operative Vicente: Almodóvar configures the contemporary Prometheus as the plastic surgeon, who makes a profession out of 'improving on the work of God'. The parallels we have already established that can be drawn between Ledgard the surgeon and Almodóvar the director can be extended here as a comment on the filmmaker's Promethean task: bringing a certain 'light' to the people, his work illuminating whichever abyss he may choose to shine it on. Here, the issues surrounding gender identity, abuse of power, and consent are the main focus.

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[51] Zeca is dressed as a tiger but it is Ledgard who we see stalking the undergrowth at Doña Casilda's party, looking for his daughter/prey, evoking a Rousseau painting, the brightly coloured bodies of copulating teenagers like the exotic flowers dotting the canvas.

[52] <http://www.elpais.com/articulo/cultura/Estoy/preparado/irme/vacio/elpepicul/20110519elpepicul_1/Tes> [Accessed 31/1/17].

One of the most disturbing (and, in its stark lack of humour, 'un-Almodóvar') scenes in the film shows the kidnapped Vicente chained to a wall in a dark basement, the first stage of punishment for his perceived transgression.[53] The image of Vicente struggling against his chains is extremely powerful and deliberately engages with the way the Prometheus legend is often illustrated [Figs. 16-18].

Figure 16: *Prometheus,* Henry Fuseli (1770-1).

Figure 17: Vicente chained to the wall of Ledgard's cave.

[53] Many critics write about the 'attempted rape', but it is not that straightforward – in fact, Almodóvar seems to be commenting on the delicate nuances of sexual consent, which are very important to the film's message about agency. The director deliberately leaves a window of ambiguity open when it comes to Vicente's motives, keeping audiences teetering right on the edge of the ethical dilemma, something vitally important in this film that is so much about consent, agency, control, and submission.

Figure 18: *Prometheus*, Richard Cosway (c. 1785-1800).

In the Greek myth, Prometheus' punishment for stealing fire from Mount Olympus in order to give it to mankind is the eternal torment of being chained to a rock and having his regenerating liver eaten each day by Zeus disguised as an eagle.[54] Here, Vicente the unfortunate captive awakes to find himself chained by both wrists to the rocky wall of a cavernous space. He is visited daily by Ledgard, now cast in the role of Zeus-as-eagle. Like Zeus, Almodóvar's deranged surgeon's version of 'eternal' punishment similarly involves cutting open the flesh of his prisoner. It is also a form of daily torment: for the rest of his life, Vicente will be confronted by his new, unelected gender identity.

Shelley's Dr. Frankenstein is, of course, the archetypal mad scientist playing God and working on a living monstrous creation, and the parallels between that story and this one are straightforward and deliberate. This relationship may, however, be drawn out further via an exploration of the traces of hysteria within these three films and the way these narratives echo the troubling dynamic played out between Charcot

[54] Pandroa's box is a motif that familiar from *Cet obscur objet* and that appears again in *Ana*.

and his patients at the Sâleptrière. As we saw in the previous chapter, analysts and historians have maintained that hysteria is 'the product of a dialogue or collaboration between the hysterical woman and the medical man' (Showalter 1997: 11). Much as a sculptor might manipulate an inanimate lump of marble into an alluring representation of Venus, the doctor sculpts his patient with his diagnosis and provides her with her (submissive) script, which she then develops and confirms with her response. In other words, as Didi-Huberman explains, 'the hysteric, constrained to exist only as the actress of her symptoms, simultaneously becomes *ideal and martyr*' (2003: 255).

As well as shifting from one sexed identity to another, Vera's character violates the additional binary of victim and monster. For Creed:

> The subject positions with which the horror film most frequently encourages the spectator to identify oscillate between those of victim and monster but with greater emphasis on the former. In this respect, the horror film sets out to explore the perverse, masochistic aspects of the gaze (1993: 154).

Almodóvar plays with this element of the genre, as our perception of who is victim and who is monster is constantly shifting. For the first half of the film, we identify with Vera as victim, at first because s/he is imprisoned, and then as the victim of a violent rape. As the narrative develops, however, we discover that in he/r former incarnation as Vicente, s/he was involved in a different rape scenario, this time as potential aggressor. This knowledge causes a sharp shift in perception, albeit one still troubled by the deliberate narrative confusion of the messages to which Vicente responds in his fateful encounter with Norma. By the end of the film, we understand Vera to be simultaneously victim and monster, which adds to he/r uncanny and unsettling dual status.

Almodóvar's filmic universe is full of bodies that can be classified as composite or irregular. From transsexual characters such as Carmen Maura as Tina in *La ley del deseo* (1987) and Antonia San Juan as Agrado in *Todo sobre mi madre* (1999), to transvestites like Miguel

Bosé's Juez Domínguez/Femme Letal (*Tacones lejanos*, 1991) and Gael García Bernal's Juan/Ángel Andrade/Zahara (*La mala educación*, 2004), to Victoria Abril as the infamous Andrea Caracortada in *Kika* (1993). In this last role, Abril plays the evil news reporter whose programme essentially shows snuff movies and whose camera is worn on her head, an extension of her body incorporated into her fabulous, 'post-apocalyptic flamenco couture' (Lev 2013: 212) costume designed by Jean Paul Gaultier.[55] We shall look at the transsexual body in more detail later on, but here I want to build on the parallel Sánchez-Mesa draws between these representations and Haraway's cyborg.

Helen McDonald writes that in the 1980's 'a new typology of ambiguous bodies emerged that exposed the performative elements of sex and gender and exposed the fragility of identity as a concept: 'the "androgynous body", the "hybrid body", the "abject body" and the "post-human body"' (2001: 3). This provides an interesting connection to Haraway's cyborg concept, which Sánchez-Mesa identifies as useful in discussion of this film: he writes that although we may all be cyborgs, women in particular are the subjects closest to this mythical figure, especially in the 20th century. To be a woman, he argues, means to always have a fictitious identity, to be an other always defined externally. In other words, following Lacan's assertion that 'there's no such thing as Woman' (1998: 72), 'woman' has always been a fiction, a concept that can be bent to fit a particular model (Sánchez-Mesa 2014: 179). As Simone de Beauvoir so famously said, 'one is not born, but rather becomes, woman' (*on ne naît pas femme: on le deviant*) (2010: 283) a statement given added significance in the context of this narrative. As we slowly begin to understand the fragmented disunity at the heart of Vera, s/he emerges as a patchwork figure held together by livid sutures, both figuratively and literally emphasised by the seams of he/r bodysuit. These 'scars' trace the remnants of the surgical trauma her body has suffered.

[55] For more detailed analysis of trans characters in Almodóvar, see Marie Piganiol (2009).

The lines of the real scars that it hints are underneath are akin to those we are accustomed to seeing in representations of Frankenstein's monster. They are further echoed in Bourgeois' lumpy, patchwork bodies [Fig. 19].

Figure 19: Robert de Niro's *Frankenstein* (1994).

Figure 20: The zips and seams on Vera's bodysuit.

Figure 21: *Arch of Hysteria*, Louise Bourgoeis (2000).

Building on Sánchez-Mesa's thoughts, let us look more closely at how Haraway's cyborg relates to this film. Her definition of a cyborg is clear: composed of organism and machine, they are synthesised creatures:

> [H]ybrid entities made of, first, ourselves and other organic creatures in our unchosen "high-technological" guise as information systems, texts, and ergonomically controlled laboring, desiring, and reproducing systems (1991: 1).

Vera is a composite text, a hybrid body articulated through violence and constructed from both organism and machine. Deleuze and Guattari suggest that all art is, in fact, composite, highlighting the ways artworks connect with one another via their concept of the tracing:

> The cultural book is necessarily a tracing: already a tracing of itself, a tracing of the previous book by the same author, a tracing of other books however different they may be, an endless tracing of established concepts and words, a tracing of the world present, past, and future (Deleuze and Guattari 2004: 26).

As we have established, *La piel* is a composite: it makes explicit a number of founding texts, including its tracing of Buñuel's *Tristana*, and Jonquet's novel. Considering they are always the result of enormous group enterprise, all films are assemblages, even those made by auteur directors like Almodóvar. One might argue that, as a medium, film itself is a cyborg: a hybrid system of reproduction. With this in mind, the Buñuelian homage in this film's establishing sequence may be interpreted as an explicit acknowledgement of the inevitable inter-relation between Almodóvar's work and that of his famous predecessor. Or, to use Deleuze and Guattari's term, a tracing of his own film's contextual past which Almodóvar then uses to sketch a bleak vision of the not so distant future.

Returning to Sánchez-Mesa, and picking up where he leaves off, we find that a deeper encounter with Haraway's theory proves

enlightening, particularly with regards to gender and selfhood. Haraway writes of women and cyborgs as monstrous 'boundary creatures':

> These boundary creatures are, literally, *monsters*, a word that shares more than its root with the word, to *demonstrate*. Monsters signify… The power-differentiated and highly contested modes of being of these monsters may be signs of possible worlds – and they are surely signs of worlds for which we are responsible (1991: 2).

Monsters defy norms and so trouble the symbolic order in ways that transgress established boundaries. In fact, transgressing these boundaries calls them into being and highlights the essential truths beneath culturally delineated ideals such as 'male' and 'female'. This transgression in itself can be a traumatic experience.

As established, traumatic experience is crucial to *La piel*'s narrative development. It explores the cause and effect nature of violence in various ways. Firstly, Ledgard's operating theatre provides the most literal example of the concentric spaces of violence discussed here - a sanctioned place within which consensual 'trauma' can occur, with a view, ideally, to ultimately curing or healing ailing bodies, although mostly used in the service of rich people's vanity and desire to halt the ageing process. Secondly, both Vicente and Ledgard are the victims of different kinds of trauma, a detail that Almodóvar seemingly includes to pose questions about possible justifications for violent crimes: are violent men born or made? This film, a horror/melodrama hybrid, is a good example of Kristeva's description of narrative as: 'the recounting of suffering: fear, disgust, and abjection crying out, they quiet down, concentrated into a story' (1982: 145). This in turn recalls statements made by Bourgeois linking her work with pain and suffering, which we shall come to look at more closely shortly.

One might argue that Ledgard is himself suffering from post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) as a result of the traumatic loss of his wife first to adultery and then to suicide, and the subsequent loss of his

daughter to mental illness. Showalter explains that male hysteria is often couched in euphemistic language, 'hidden' under various diagnoses including hypochondria, neurospasia, and post-traumatic stress disorder (1997: 64). If PTSD is an iteration of male hysteria, this line of thought suggests that Vera is the product of Ledgard's own hysterical expression. If we return again to the guiding image of a man using the female body as the bow from which to launch the metaphorical arrow of his own hysterical expression of grief, the image of Vera bent into the hysterical arch applies as much if not more so to the hysteria of her (onscreen) creator. The traumatic events that prefigure this kind of hysterical manipulation of the female body are relevant in all three films – in *Cet obscur objet*, the trauma of desire is represented by sporadic terrorist attacks and the grief folded into it; here it concerns Ledgard's multiple losses, and the trauma suffered by Vicente, the victim of a misunderstanding that leads to a brutal surgical revenge. And as we shall see in the following chapter, in *Ana* Medem represents this trauma as fundamental to the ancient history of the male/female relationship.

Continuing the theme of the Gothic monstrous double, Ledgard is also rendered abject: his mania for revenge leads him to commit a terrible, premeditated crime. Kristeva writes that:

> Any crime, because it draws attention to the fragility of the law, is abject, but premeditated crime, cunning murder, hypocritical revenge are even more so because they heighten the display of such fragility (1982: 4).

As such, we may interpret Ledgard himself as an abject figure in parallel to Vera: where s/he has been forced to transgress the boundaries of he/r sexed identity, Ledgard has strayed into what Bataille identifies as 'a forbidden field of behaviour' (2006: 80) (that goes against the law), of his own free will.

For Bataille, violence and transgression are inextricably connected:

> Violence, not cruel in itself, is essentially something organised in the transgression of taboos. Cruelty is one of its forms. It is not necessarily erotic but it may veer towards other forms of violence organised by transgression (2006: 79).

The horror of Ledgard's revenge is amplified by the fact that his act of violence is one of the utmost cruelty, carefully plotted and dispassionately carried out over many years. This cruelty then escalates before straying into the territory of the erotic: the plastic surgeon ends up transforming his victim into his own obscure object of desire. Furthermore, the figure of the surgeon is deeply connected to the abject, associated with bodies that have ceased to be 'clean and proper'. Creed maintains that 'the wound is a sign of abjection in that it violates the skin which forms a border between the inside and the outside of the body' (1993: 82). Ledgard wounds his patients, perforating the skin boundary and collapsing the border between inside and outside, albeit within the operating theatre, a space of (usually) consensual violence. Vera is abject in that she defies the traditional gender binary, and in his transgression of the law, Ledgard becomes her abject double.

Theatres of all kinds play an important and recurring role in Almodóvar's work. Mark Allinson highlights that the theatrical *mise-en-abîme* encourages a more abstract setting, while also enabling 'the introduction of a further thematic element, that of acting, performance, and, by extension, the "performativity" of life itself' (Allinson, 2005: 234). The sumptuous red velvet of the theatre in *Hable con ella* (2002) or *Todo sobre mi madre* (1999) is heavily associated with the feminine body. In this narrative, is replaced by the cold, sterile blue of the operating theatre, a space dominated by the masculine will to power. Here, Ledgard 'performs' the role of the accomplished surgeon, while in reality, beneath the 'skin' of this character (the blue scrubs and latex gloves), he is nothing more than a vengeful, merciless torturer. It is on this surgical

'stage' that the initial irrevocable steps towards Vicente's performance of a new gender are taken.

The horrific transformation of a human body from *heimlich* to *unheimlich* is most harrowingly demonstrated when Ledgard visits Vicente after he has performed the vaginoplasty.[56] This is the first stage of Vicente's gradual transformation into Vera, and at this point in the narrative the captive still appears to be largely 'himself'; Vicente still passes as male, even though his genitalia no longer match his gender identity and he is beginning to become a spliced creature. The deadpan way in which Ledgard explains to his horrified 'patient' the process of gradually widening his new designer vagina adds a touch of deeply uncomfortable (and, keeping in mind characters such as the paedophilic dentist from *¿Que he hecho yo para merecer esto?* (1984), typical of Almodóvar) black humour to the proceedings. The surgeon lines up a set of vaginal dilators that gradually increase in size, and discusses the process as though Vicente had been a willing participant in the surgery. A shot of Vicente framed by the six dilators emphasises the presentation of his new gender as a prison in an image that is at once darkly comic and eerily poignant [Fig. 22]. It also recalls the two sets of bars from the film's opening sequence, confirming that Vicente's prison is indeed many layered and impenetrable.

[56] In his discussion of clones and their uncanny status, Baudrillard describes 'the imaginary power and wealth of the double – the one in which the strangeness and at the same time the intimacy of the subject to itself are played out' (2016: 95).

Figure 22: Vaginal dilators mimic prison bars.

We know that, unlike Dr. Frankenstein (and, one would think, against all odds) Ledgard ends up falling in love with the 'monster' he creates, and it is with reference to this that Almodóvar makes clear his allusion to another Greek myth, Galatea. Zurian notes the following quotation from Almodóvar, taken from *La piel*'s private press book from 2011:

> El doctor Frankenstein no podía enamorarse del monstruo que creó, pero el doctor Robert sí. Y aquí el mito de Galatea, del escultor enamorado de su obra, desplaza a los otros mitos (2013: 273).[57]

Galatea is another of those profoundly masculine myths associated with the idea of the double that recurs throughout cinematic history (famously in Alfred Hitchcock's *Vertigo* (1958), for example). Sánchez-Mesa observes that this fantasy of creating the ideal, imaginary, and perfect woman from scratch reverberates across our imaginative history:

[57] Similarly, in his discussion of the representation of women in Medem's early cinema, Sánchez underlines the significance of this time-honoured narrative, writing that 'man's attempt to construct an idealized woman that fits his fantasies is an old topic represented in Greek and Christian mythology,' (1997: 156) citing George Bernard Shaw's *Pygmalion* (1912) as an example.

> [D]esde Ovidio y su relato de la pasión del rey Pigmalión (felizmente cumplida al insuflarse vida a la hermosa Galatea) hasta las historias de ginoides, robots y mujeres virtuales que pueblan la literatura fantástica y de ciencia ficción contemporáneas (2014: 173).[58]

Vera is neither virtual nor robotic, but while not strictly a gynoid (or 'fembot'), s/he is still a new and improved version of Gal, an uncanny doppelgänger. In one scene, Ledgard tests Vera's flawless skin with a blowtorch to be sure s/he cannot feel it. This reinforces he/r uncanny monstrosity, he/r 'thingness'. Separated from he/r sense of touch s/he is rendered partly inanimate, a living mannequin, with he/r 'real' self buried deeper under the new genetically modified epidermis. In addition, Vera is fitted with a vagina designed by Ledgard himself, to his own specifications. What could be better in terms of disavowing residual fears of the 'vagina dentata' than moulding it oneself? A benign sex organ divorced from that which makes woman a monstrous proposition in the first place: her uncanny ability to become multiple through pregnancy.[59]

Ledgard and Vera are both represented as 'monstrous', with Ledgard the brutal psychopath and Vera an example of uncanny feminine monstrosity. As Sánchez-Mesa writes, monsters have always been on the edges of the community in Western cultures – be they centaurs, amazons, conjoined twins or hermaphrodites (2014: 180). And each monster must have its lair. Like the remote medieval castle in Sade's *The 120 Days of Sodom* (1785), *El Cigarral* is isolated from the local community. Within the house, Ledgard's monstrous lair is his operating theatre/mad scientist's laboratory, a space that should denote sanctified and consensual violence but in this tale of horrifying abuse of power, does not. Once he crosses the threshold, Ledgard is able to indulge his violent urges under the guise of professional activity, the surgery he

[58] Other examples of this plot device are: *Sarrasine* by Honoré de Balzac (1830); the film *Weird Science* (1985); the Broadway musical *My Fair Lady* (1956); the American TV sitcom *Living Doll* (1964-65); the ballet *Coppélia* (which premiered in 1870), to name but a few.
[59] See Creed (1993).

performs being an act of culturally and socially approved mutilation.[60] We are urged to consider the surgeon as an agent of sadistic power. Here, Ledgard's transgressive act is to perform a non-consensual act of violence inside a space that legitimises it. This is the abuse of power that Almodóvar has repeatedly emphasised as an important theme, and what Zurian identifies as 'the terror that results from the exercise of absolute power, unchecked by any type of moral or ethical counterweight' (2013: 263).

In Charcot's medical world, voyeurism and documentation were the natural partners of the hysterical arch, which was itself a spectacle that necessitated an audience: 'at Salpêtrière, between 1872 and 1878, Charcot demonstrated to awestruck audiences a bewildering spectrum of hysterical manifestations' (Pearce 2014: 1). If Ledgard's basement laboratory and operating theatre are his monstrous lairs, the Salpêtrière itself is Charcot's. Both the fictional and the real doctors in question are men with the opportunity to observe and mutilate the bodies of those with less structural power than them. Within Ledgard's house of surgical horrors lies Vera's lair/prison. We shall now look in more detail at the way he/r space mimics the transformation of he/r body, and the acts of reclamation s/he performs, via Bourgeois' artwork, so that a prison cell might become a sanctuary.

[60] Almodóvar has long been fascinated by medical spaces and the behaviour of people within them, and we find in *Hable con ella* (2002) a precursor to this exploration of the notion of consent.

Louise Bourgeois in captivity: art is a guarantee of sanity

Bourgeois' work deals explicitly with traumatic memories and the effect they have on the subject.[61] About *Cells*, a series of installations made between 1989 and the mid-90s, she wrote: 'the subject of pain is the business I am in. To give meaning and shape to frustration and suffering' (Storr 2003: 132).[62] This quote appears in Robert Storr (2003), a copy of which actually appears in the film itself, and is one of the texts from which Vera copies Bourgeois' sculptures and drawings. In relation to Bourgeois' work, Germano Celant writes about the cathartic experience art offers, describing this century's 'planetary upheavals', in which he states similar fears to those expressed by Buñuel regarding the increasing presence of terrorism, globally (2010: 7). He describes how Bourgeois' body of work presents 'a way of exorcizing every fear' (Celant 2010: 7). Perhaps we might view the traumatic narrative of *La piel* through a similar lens? By inviting the viewer into violent spaces where abject acts threaten Vera's fundamental sense of identity, what response does Almodóvar expect from his audience? Does the world of *La piel* offer us any clues as to how to survive these unstable and frightening times? Or does it simply replicate to excess our contemporary post modern, posthuman fears?[63]

The *Cells* (1989 – mid-90s) are particularly relevant here in relation to the prison motif and the monster's lair, but also in terms of the small salvation Almodóvar's plot offers Vera via art. The *Cells* were designed to evoke 'both the punishment of the prison cell and the contemplative element of the convent cell' (Morris 2003: 16), and Vera's room has the same dual function. Ledgard provides a large, flat screen television and the programmes it shows carry symbolic significance. One features a female yoga instructor who poignantly describes the internal place of

[61] Bourgeois' interest in psychoanalysis fuelled her work and 'became a way of life' (Hustvedt 2016: 26).

[62] Hustvedt describes the *Cells* as calling forth 'multiple interpretations' and emotions 'that shuttle between poles – from calm to fury, from tenderness to violence' (2016: 28).

[63] We will come back to the theme of trauma and its relationship with hysteria in greater detail with reference to *Ana* in the following chapter.

sanctuary that can be developed through regular practice, emphasising that 'you can practice it anywhere, on a hospital bed, in jail' and that it is a refuge that no one else can access or pollute.[64] Another is a video of Bourgeois' sculptures, in particular her fabric works, which are shown in close up as a series of roughly shaped bodies stitched together in formations that present creatures that are of mixed sexes, often non-binary or indeterminate, their 'skin' and shape the opposite of Vera's highly aesthetic appearance.[65] S/he also copies a series of severed heads, sculpted from clay and overlaid with torn pieces of fabric. Describing Bourgeois' original heads, Mitchell writes,

> 'These severed heads portray that moment, which cannot be borne, when opposites – love and hate, girl and boy – are lived simultaneously. The heads show the unbearable as unbearable. For Bourgeois, this was trauma' (2014: 14).

The gradual transformation of Vera's internal and external worlds illustrates an attempt to make the unbearable bearable, but these severed heads remind the viewer of the depth of the trauma playing out onscreen. With the help of yoga and a visual language learned from Bourgeois, Vera turns he/r own cell – represented by both he/r body and he/r room – into a sanctuary rather than a prison. S/he colonises it and uses it as a refuge from within which s/he can prepare he/rself mentally and physically for he/r eventual escape.

The *Cells* series also explores voyeurism, 'the pleasure of the voyeur, the thrill of looking and being looked at' (Bourgeois in Storr et al. 2003: 132), all of which are familiar fascinations for Almodóvar.[66] The work Bourgeois makes is interested in representing both sides of a single paradigm – it is not only bisexual, but bi-focal: the *Cells* are about the tension between both subject positions, setting the stage for a self-reflexive performance of looking and being looked at. This is best

[64] See Baudrillard's thoughts on the internal prosthesis (2016: 101-102).
[65] See Morris (2003: 25-26).
[66] *Kika* (Almodóvar, 1993) most notoriously explores the theme of voyeurism.

epitomised by the previously mentioned scene where Ledgard is in his study, separated from his prisoner by one wall, observing Vera's body on an enormous, wall-sized television screen and zooming in and out. S/he stares back at him, knowing that he is watching he/r but unable able to actually see him, beautiful but fearsome and monstrously enlarged [Fig. 23].

Figure 23: Ledgard looking at a zoomed in image of Vera on the giant screen in his office.

Figure 24: *Olympia*, Édouard Manet (1865).

Unlike the demure beauties on the wall outside, this Venus looks back. Manet's famous *Olympia* (1863) is another riff subverting the theme of the idealised, demure sexuality represented in Titian's two renditions of Venus. Manet gives his 'Venus' agency, independence, and defiance – she, too, looks back. Vera's gaze, like Olympia's, is active, aware of he/r objectification, and responsive to it [Fig. 24]. Vera is a disobedient object of the gaze, responding to its potentially sadistic and controlling power with as much defiance as is permitted by he/r imprisonment. The *Cells* are evoked when Ledgard is looking at Vera on the giant screen, the meta-film within a film that calls attention our own voyeuristic gaze. Again we are reminded of the cyborg: Ledgard experiences Vera as much via he/r image projected on his various screens as he does via he/r living human body. What's more, his physical interactions with he/r are largely conducted when s/he is unconscious on his operating table, an objectified body devoid of any animation, a pliable mannequin entirely at his mercy.

At this point I want to bring in the work of another female artist, Cindy Sherman, whose work is synonymous with the abject female body, and 'is generally considered an exemplar of the instability of identity' (Schor 1996: 52).[67] Notorious for her representations of the feminine 'in infinite varieties of masquerade' (Mulvey 1991: 138), Sherman is an important reference point in this discussion both thematically and visually. In this context, her exploration of the coded female body as an abject entity provides an interesting parallel to Vera-as-mannequin: Gutiérrez-Albilla notes that Sherman attempts to 'link Bataille with Kristeva in order to deal with the abject through the representation of the body as vulnerable, wounded, gendered, sexual, fragmented, horrific, uncanny, scatological or excessive' (2004: 18).

Sherman's *Untitled (mannequin)* (1992), which was shown as part of an exhibition at the Whitney Museum in 1993 called 'Abject Art', is

[67] Gutiérrez-Albilla also references Sherman in discussion about Buñuel with reference to abjection and fetishism via Mulvey (2008: 31).

particularly fitting here [Fig. 25].[68] This consummate image of 'fragmented, horrific, uncanny' femininity provides a visual parallel to Almodóvar's *mise-en-scène*, with both playing on what Deborah Covino calls 'the aesthetic surgical imaginary' (2004: 42). Sherman's monstrous amalgamation of body parts remains deeply unerotic and clinical despite its sexualised pose, and calls to mind several shots in the film when Ledgard is modelling his transgenic skin on a life size plastic mannequin before applying it to Vera's body [Fig. 26].

Figure 25: *Untitled (mannequin)*, Cindy Sherman (1992).

[68] The exhibition included a piece from Bourgeois entitled 'Nature Study', a surreal, sphinx-like figure that appears to be a mixture of woman, lion, and abstract shapes, it also explores the notions of the monstrous in conjunction with femininity.

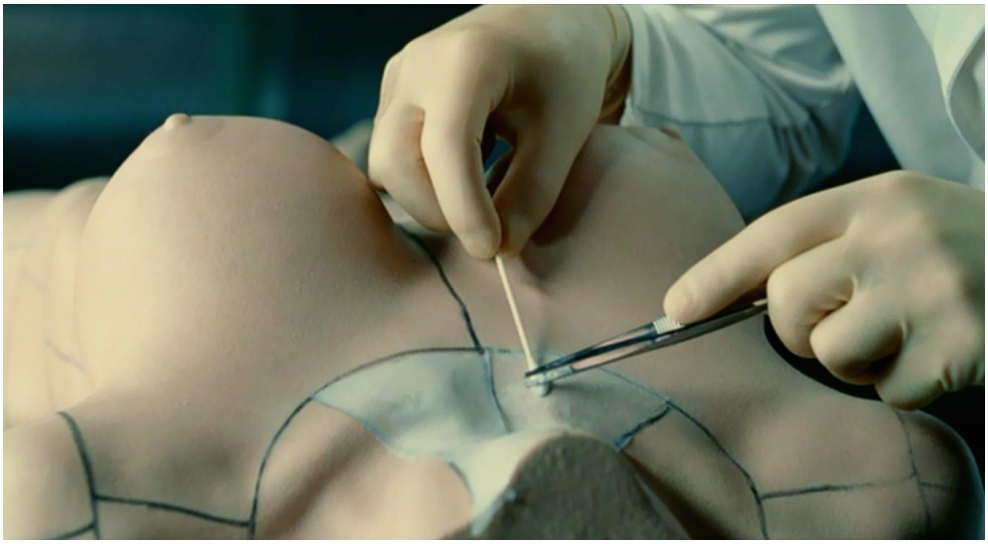

Figure 26: Ledgard applying sections of skin to his surgical dummy.

An apt link to Ledgard, his surgery/laboratory and the 'living doll' he is creating there, Sherman's sculptures are made using parts of surgical dummies created from a special kind of silicone skin designed for medical students to practise surgery on. This abstraction of form is nothing new in the pursuit of representing the perfect female nude. For example, Berger informs us that Renaissance painter Albrecht Dürer 'believed that the ideal nude ought to be constructed by taking the face of one body, the breasts of another, the legs of a third, the shoulders of a fourth, the hands of a fifth – and so on' (2008: 62). This is what makes Sherman's image so subversive and powerful – her ideal parts are assembled in such a way as to highlight the abject horror inherent in the act of carving up numerous bodies in order to create a perfect ideal. Vera, on the other hand, is carefully put together in the 'right' way, so that when s/he is 'finished', any connection to Sherman's visually abject creation all but disappears: it is only with knowledge of he/r backstory that Vera can be understood as the 'monstrous' liminal creature s/he really is.[69]

[69] It is important to qualify that this argument does not by any means suggest that the transsexual body itself is monstrous, merely that in the context of this narrative it becomes so because Vicente is dominated and operated on against his will: in this context, this monstrous act creates a body that is monstrous.

Vera the post-human cyborg redefines the feminine ideal as a body that 'transcends binaries and embraces artificiality through fiction' (McDonald 2001: 3). This in turn grows out of Almodóvar's postmodernism, which aims to subvert the modernist tendency to link beauty and morality by mistrusting both concepts, working instead to rebel against and disturb these norms (Dickson and Romanets 2014: 4). In a postmodern, posthuman update of Buñuel's two 'obscure' women, for Ledgard, Vera's body and he/r digital image represent two versions of one whole.

In *Cells,* Bourgeois 'pits herself against herself and regains possession of her "truth"' (Celant 2010: 17), and Vera does the same from within he/r sanitized prison cell. S/he uses the tools permitted to he/r within he/r confinement to find he/r own veracity – he/r internal 'city of Vera', he/r essential truth. One of the *Cells* is particularly relevant here, as it contains a body bent into Charcot's hysterical *arc-en-cercle* [Fig. 27].

Figure 27: *Cell (Arch of Hysteria)*, Louise Bourgeois, (1993).

Recalling the film's opening sequence, where Vera is bent into a corresponding arch, we may draw a direct parallel between the two images. Discussing the *Cell* with the arch of hysteria, Bourgeois wrote;

> The Cell with the figure or arch of hysteria deals with emotional and psychological pain. Here is the arch of hysteria, pleasure and pain are merged in a state of happiness. Her arch – the mounting of tension and the release of tension – is sexual. It is a substitute for orgasm, with no access to sex. She creates her own world and is very happy. Nowhere is it written that a person in these states is suffering. She functions in a self-made cell where the rules of happiness and stress are unknown to us (in Storr et al 2003: 134).

For Bourgeois, the hysterical arch is a pose that seems to represent an internal escape from external imprisonment. As previously stated, Vera is the shell Vicente 'inhabits', and so he/r cell becomes the room that the 'lived in' body *lives in*. Like one Russian doll nesting within another, and another, Vera is encased in: *El Cigarral,* he/r cell, the ghost of Gal who s/he so strongly resembles, he/r bodysuit, and finally the transgenic skin that now covers he/r every inch. Vicente's skin becomes a space in which *he* lives because it becomes separated from the essence of him. Ledgard wrenches inner from outer self, transforming the body into a shell, a foreign shell of a different gender, and superhero skin, leaving Vicente like a hermit crab that has crawled into someone else's carapace. The only course for survival is to embrace the eventual necessity of becoming a true composite, subsuming both the masculine interior and the surgically augmented feminine exterior and emerging a proud cyborg**.**

The cell is a motif that functions on a molecular level, too, both in terms of narrative development and the *mise-en-scène*. Firstly, and most obviously, cells feature prominently in Ledgard's research. Five minutes in to the film the camera fetishistically introduces the viewer to the scientific processes and accoutrements in Ledgard's laboratory, including artistic close-ups on slides under a microscope that show – true to Almodóvar's long standing, signature contrasting palette – red and blue cells mingling projected on a screen [Fig. 28].

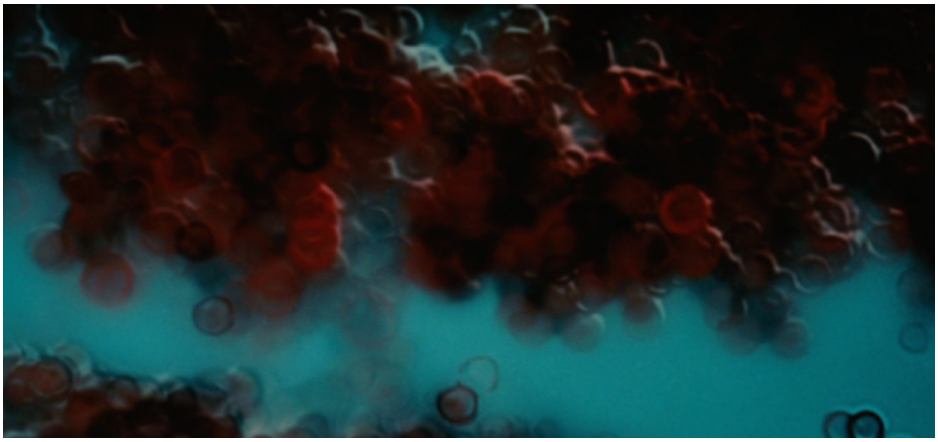

Figure 28; Cells under the microscope.

It traces over petrie dishes and electronic machines as a more traditional melodramatic camera might take in the contents of a glamorous starlet's dressing table covered with lipsticks, powder puffs, and atomisers (recalling, in particular, the kitsch opening credits of *Mujeres al borde*). The voyeurism that is such a central motif in this film is visually paraphrased here in the image of a scientist scrutinizing cells under a microscope, the symbolic mingling of red and blue suggesting the physical splicing together of masculine and feminine body parts that is to come.

Figure 29: *In and Out*, Louise Bourgeois (1995).

The hysterical female body has been metaphorically 'under the microscope', deconstructed, scrutinised, and institutionalised through medical discourse to such an extent that, like the female nude, it too has been objectified to the point of violence. Bourgeois beautifully captures the intensity of this constant surveillance in *In and Out* [Fig. 29], a *Cell* in which she exploits the contrast in texture between the wooden hysterical body and the steely, clinical sheen of the reflective surfaces that surround it. Its circular forms are repeated in the *mise-en-scène* of Vera's equivalent cell [Fig. 30]. In *La piel,* Vera the hysterical Gothic body is, like Bourgeois' wooden figure, once again cast in the role of Irigaray's 'obliging prop' (1985: 25), further emphasised by the recurring doll motif, and the fact that Vera spends hours sedated on Ledgard's surgical gurney, anaesthetised and literally and figuratively objectified – to apply Irigaray's words, s/he is caught in a 'prostitution of her body to a desire that is not her own' (1985: 25). The desire in question is Ledgard's thirst for revenge and scientific discovery.

Figure 22: Vera's cell.

The abject female body is itself a Gothic trope, and Showalter points out that, in the 1980s, feminist critics 'defined the female gothic as the paradigmatic genre of hysterical narrative', its classic scenario one where 'a young woman is trapped in an enclosure, a haunted castle or dungeon' (1997: 92). *La piel*'s narrative initially presents as just that, bridging Gothic and horror motifs. Trapped in *El Cigarral* and subject to such all-encompassing levels of control, silence is Vera's only real mode of resistance.[70] He/r internal world is the only place left with any access to he/r previous life as Vicente, but also the only place inaccessible to Ledgard. This emphasis on yoga and meditation points to worlds not mediated by a corrupted symbolic order that Ledgard and *El Cigarral* come to represent.

[70] Patricia MacCormack comments on the structural problems women face when speaking about sexuality: 'Speaking our sexuality, which necessitates speaking our gender, laces us within a stratified system of possibility of desire. When we refuse to speak we are the nothing that is before and beyond any thing' (2008: 20); Antonio Sánchez notes how Medem's *La ardilla roja* 'reflects feminism's concern with constructing an alternative identity outside the discourses and value imposed by patriarchal culture, constituting the Symbolic Order' (1997: 156), something underlined here by Bourgeois' work and the fact Vera 'speaks' he/r truth via a visual and physical language (yoga) long before s/he is able to verbally articulate it at the very end.

If yoga provides a possible route to transcending the historical imprisonment of the female nude and the hysterical abject female body, silence is offered as another temporary refuge. Prior to the act of violent revenge that will ultimately free Vera, the silence of meditation enables he/r to reclaim some space for he/rself. This act is mirrored by her writing on the walls of he/r room, words that describe he/r internal journey to acceptance. Foucault says that 'power reduces one to silence', but continues, 'truth does not belong to the order of power, but shares an original affinity with freedom' (1990: 60). Ultimately, Vera's name proves auspicious after all – after a long silence, it is through finally claiming he/r freedom that sh/e is able to speak he/r fundamental truth, in the words that close the film: 'soy Vicente'. Until this moment, the only language of truth available to Vera has been non-verbal, a physical 'language of resistance' that bypasses the linguistic pitfalls of a masculine symbolic order already inscribed with violence. As noted by Sánchez, when searching for a marginal cultural or personal identity, 'any attempt to implement this "search" through a language that is by definition male will unavoidably result in women's further alienation' (1997: 156). It is not insignificant that Vera's TV yoga instructor and the artist that inspires her are women both 'speaking' a language of the body. Words have proved treacherous for poor Vicente, whose fateful miscommunication with Norma exposes the risks surrounding linguistic ambiguity and a failure to understand the other.

Research describes how the bodies of Charcot's hysterical patients were sometimes brutalized during their internment, subjected to agonizing procedures such as the cauterization of the cervix with a hot iron (Walusinski 2014: 72). There is an obvious parallel to be drawn here with the violent procedures suffered by Vicente over the course of his enforced transition. But we may also view these as a reverse process: in castrating Vicente and turning him into Vera, the hysterical Ledgard, suffering himself from a contained form of PTSD, artificially creates his own hysterical patient. We learn in the opening sequence that Ledgard

gives Vera opium, something that resurfaces later in the narrative when s/he begins writing in eyeliner on the walls of her cell 'the opium helps me forget'.[71] As we shall examine in closer detail in the following chapter, amnesia is a hysterical symptom. According to this reading, Zeca's (aesthetically jarring and excessive) appearance is the catalyst for Vera's release not only from he/r captivity but also from he/r hysterical symptoms. When Marilia tells Vera the full story after he/r rape, Vera's drug-induced amnesia is no longer in effect, and with knowledge comes power. When we first see he/r bent into the hysterical arch s/he does not yet know the full story. Problematically, as is so often the case with sexual violence in Almodóvar's narratives, Vera's rape is a catalyst for discovering a 'truth' that will release he/r from the imposed silence and confinement associated with hysteria.

Let us now focus on the writing on Vera's walls. Vera's lair is the room where Ledgard confines he/r; a space that begins as a prison cell but which s/he gradually colonises by writing mantras on the walls, thereby gradually transforming it into a space of sanctuary and strength. Smith writes that 'Almodóvar hints, like Freud, that home and horror are intimately connected' (2014: 207), and Vera's narrative is essentially a backwards story, one of the uncanny becoming homely once more. As well as marking the number of days spent in captivity, Vera copies images onto the walls from the Bourgeois exhibition catalogue she has been permitted to keep [Figs. 32-34]. Some of these pictures are from Bourgeois' *Femmes maisons*, a series of female nudes that are half woman, half house [Fig. 31]. These figures speak of a repression that stems from being split in two, and their relevance to the narrative is twofold: on the one hand, they illustrate the fact of Vera's imprisonment, but as the narrative unfolds we realise that they may also speak of the

[71] The subject of body as prison recalls *Hable con ella* (2002), which similarly explores issues of rape, consent, and abuse of power within a medical setting. Powerful drugs can separate the mental from the physical and turn the body into a prison, too, and were used to treat Charcot's patients: 'the medications used at La Salpêtrière are now mostly considered narcotics' (Walusinski 2014: 72).

dual condition of Vera/Vicente, and the cyborg nature of this complex protagonist.

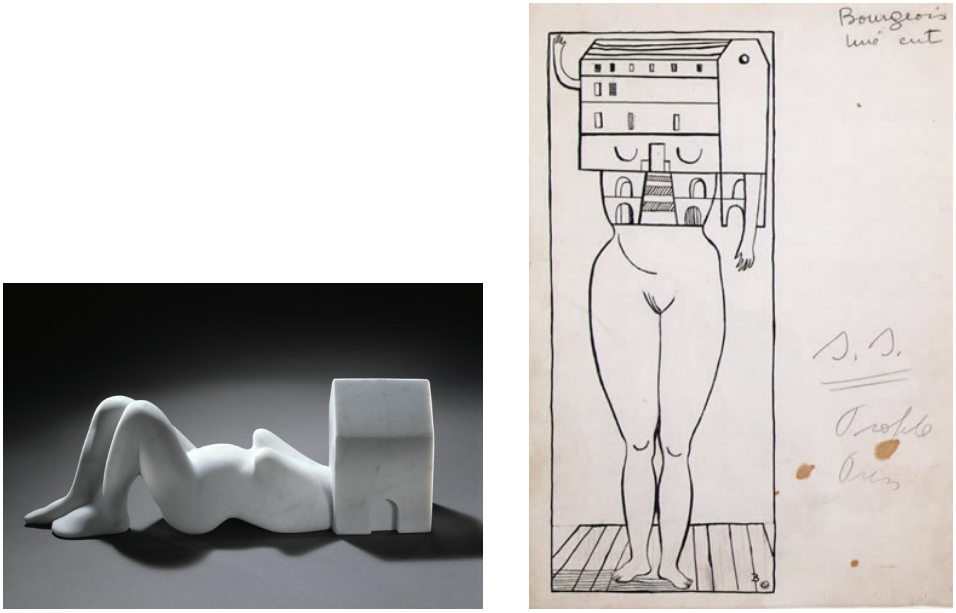

Figure 23: *Femmes maisons*, Louise Bourgeois (1946-7).

The transformative power of Bourgeois' art is once again central here, providing Vera with an example that s/he might emulate:

> The shift from passive to active and the inversion of the function of lair from refuge to prison are typical of the paradoxical implications of Bourgeois's philosophy – a constant turning of tables (Bernadac 2006: 100).

The paradoxes and undulations (both physical and thematic) of Bourgeois' work offer a new structure from within which Vera can relearn he/rself – a metaphorical womb in the form of a vernacular of resistance, through which s/he is able to find a way to articulate he/r new truth as a composite figure.

In *The Poetics of Space* (1958), Gaston Bachelard writes:

> The fact is that a creature that comes out of its shell suggests daydreams of a mixed creature that is not only "half fish, half flesh,"

> but also half dead, half alive, and, in extreme cases, half stone, half man (1994: 109).

Vera is indeed a 'mixed creature': half male, half female; or, half human, half superhuman; or, half fantasy, half nightmare; an amalgamation, like Frankenstein's monster. The film is in fact full of these 'mixed creatures' – at the party where Vicente and Nora meet, their friends are seen copulating in the bushes, and White calls them 'mutant entities' 'centaurs' and 'radioactive nymphs', referring to their bodies contorted and joined together in different sexual positions; the imprisoned Vicente looks like a monstrous centaur-like creature as he appears fused with the blue water bowl as he desperately drinks its contents; Zeca the animal-man; post-car crash Gal, like the Undead, swaddled in bandages, a living mummy.[72]

In French, the phrase *femme maison* means 'housewife', a role Vera engages with at various points. In what later emerges as a sinister omen, when captive in Ledgard's cave, the pre-operative Vicente is chained up near some of Norma's old childhood toys, one of which is a miniature kitchen. Ultimately, it is by assuming the role of *femme maison* that Vera is finally able to claim he/r freedom. In the aftermath of he/r violent rape, Ledgard finally permits Vera to leave her cell and live with him as a partner rather than a prisoner.

The *Femmes Maisons* refer to a dual condition, and:

> [I]n relation to Georges Bataille, to the parallels between mouth and vagina, between high and low, pure and impure. A coupling made possible by the language of art, which feeds on hybrid pairings to compose another body: a centaur somewhere between clothing and the flesh (Celant 2010: 15).

The inherent multiplicity of the work of art comes into play here, for whether visual or textual, creative work does not exist in a vacuum. Hustvedt states, 'artists are cannibals. We consume other artists, and they become part of us – flesh and bone – only to be spewed out again in

[72] < http://www.filmquarterly.org/2011/10/escape-artistry-debating-the-skin-i-live-in/> [Accessed 9/3/17].

our own works' (2016: 30). Installations like *Cells* are particularly powerful as they invite the viewer to step into the space and become a part of the work, they compel a level of engagement that is more immersive than two-dimensional pieces. For Bourgeois, making art was deeply connected to mental wellbeing: she famously declared 'art is the guarantee of sanity' was the most important thing she has ever said.[73] As Vera copies Bourgeois work onto the walls of he/r cell, borrowing Hustvedt's metaphor, we may say that Almodóvar presents Vera's artistic cannibalism as equally therapeutic.

[73] <http://www.nytimes.com/2001/12/25/arts/louise-bourgeois-at-90-weaving-complexities.html> [Accessed 2/3/17].

Figure 24: Vera's copies of Bourgeois' severed heads.

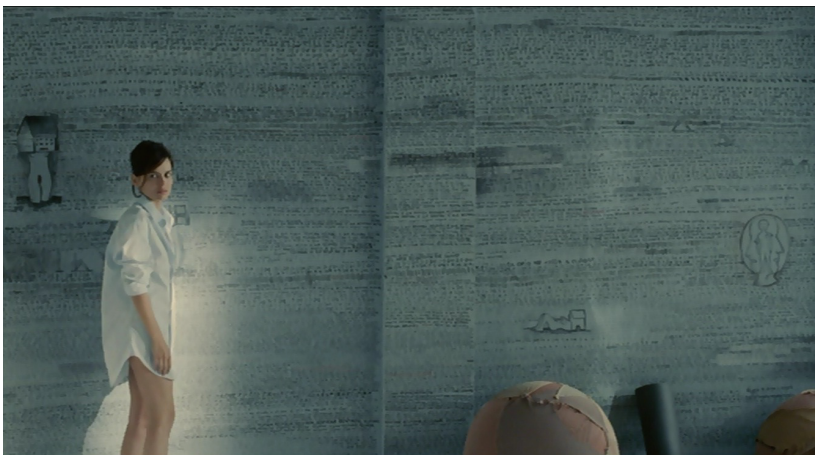

Figure 25: Vera in front her copies of both *Femmes maisons*.

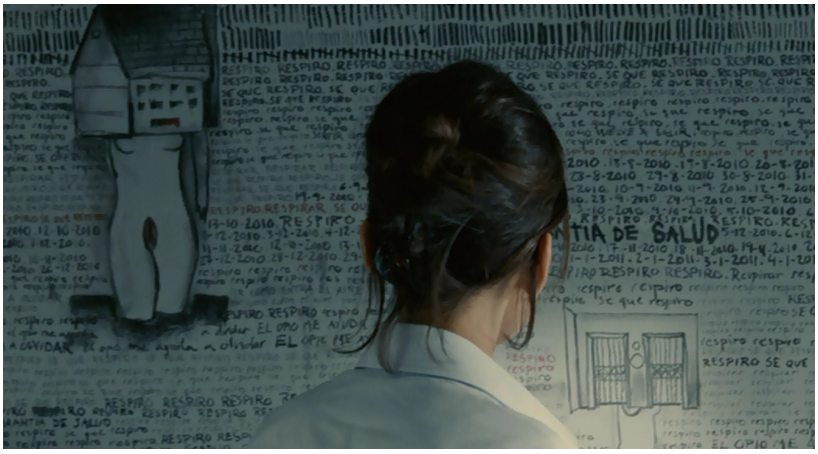

Figure 26: Close up on one of the *Femmes maisons*.

Conclusion: a skin of one's own

Kristeva describes the abject as 'the place where meaning collapses', 'the place where "I" am not' (1982: 2). We might interpret Vera as the place where 'I' am not – no longer Vicente in body, can s/he remain Vicente in mind? Again we return to the idea of the body as inhabited space, the act of 'living' within one's own skin. *La piel* asks us to imagine what becomes of the 'I' of the self if the body is hijacked. Does the separation of inside from outside cause the annihilation of the integrated self, and leave a monstrous creature in its place?

Skin is the human body's largest organ, and as the surface of the body it is the point of contact between the human and everything else, yet it has come to function as a visual representation of a whole that is more than simply physical. In *The Skin Ego*, Didier Anzieu remarks that the skin is of 'both an organic and an imaginary order, both a system for protecting our individuality and a first instrument and site of interaction with others' (1989: 3). In Vera's case, the internal self 'protected' by this skin and the external self 'projected' by it are cleaved into two different entities that grow increasingly disparate as Ledgard performs more procedures on he/r body. By eventually showing us the process behind this transformation, Almodóvar encourages the viewer to question the significance of this 'frontier' of the self, and think about what might happen to the 'more than physical' that is implied by it were it to change dramatically. He presents us with and then deconstructs a vision of perfect femininity, the surgical ideal of a body that defies the laws of nature.

Anzieu observes that, 'to be oneself is first of all to have a skin of one's own and, secondly, to use it as a space in which one can experience sensations' (1989: 51). The echo in the phrasing of Virginia Woolf's 'a room of one's own' again pushes the idea of the skin as a space, like a room, cell, or lair that can be inhabited. It evokes the need for storytelling in the construction of identity, both internally and out loud,

and draws attention to the stories we might inadvertently tell with our bodies. The fact that this phrase resonates so strongly in the female sphere can be understood in this context as a comment on agency, authenticity, and self-determination. If 'to be oneself' is to have 'a skin of one's own', that is, an autonomous and coherent experience of selfhood, then poor Vera has no hope of true authenticity. After all, one could argue that Vera does not really exist, rather s/he is an artificially constructed shell, and trapped inside 'he/r' augmented outer skin is whatever is left of Vicente. What is horrifying, or monstrous, about Vera is this very liminality. Writing about the gothic body, Kelly Hurley notes that 'to be Undead, to be simultaneously human and animal, to shift from one sexed identity to another, is to explode crucial binarisms that lie at the foundation of human identity' (1996: 25). Suspended between life and death, the anaesthetised body is in effect 'undead', so Vera's body also transgresses the boundary between the living and the dead.

For Baudrillard, 'simulation threatens the difference between the "true" and the "false," the "real" and the "imaginary"' (2016: 3). At what point does Vera cease to be a 'simulation' of femininity and actually become a woman? Almodóvar frames and questions the traditional paradigm by which the male artist makes his name via representation of the naked female body (as archetypal commodity), profiting from a skin that his not his own. There is a knowing acceptance of this dynamic at play here, where the actor is an object for the director to manipulate. The naked female actor's body is here another example of the way that nudity can be a form of dress: Anaya's naked flesh may be 'clothed' in her performance as Vera, but it is still offered up as 'prey' for the spectator's gaze to feast upon.

If horror films create 'a *mise-en-scène* of desire – in which desire is for the abject' (Creed 1993: 154), Almodóvar goes beyond this and distorts and manipulates this desire. By tricking the viewer into misreading the object of desire as a beautiful woman, our relationship to this seductive object becomes complicated. S/he is revealed to be a truly

'monstrous' female, constructed out of a composite of Ledgard's revenge and resurrection fantasies. After the plot twist is revealed, Vera becomes a figure of abjection for the viewer. If 'it is in relation to this abject scene that the subject, and by extension the viewer, is caught up' (Creed 1993: 154), then Almodóvar's *mise-en-scène* of desire has sutured us to Vera so that when we discover the truth about he/r, we are indeed 'caught up'. Any pleasure taken in looking at he/r becomes forcibly perverse, and he/r heterogeneity appears monstrous; if the operating theatre and the bedroom (after Bataille) can be spaces of sanctioned violence, then so too can the cinema.

Almodóvar's horror/thriller hybrid is a film that investigates emotional and bodily territories imprinted by desire and trauma: the imprint left on Ledgard (a desire for fraternal vengeance) and his daughter (post-traumatic mental breakdown) by the death of the wife/mother; the genetic imprint of the madness Marilia talks of passing on to her two sons ('llevo la locura en mis entrañas'); the Buñuelian homage which acknowledges the imprint of past directors on Almodóvar himself, not to mention the self-reflexive imprint of his own work; the imprint of Bourgeois, Shelley, and Greek mythology. Marks emphasises 'the tactile and contagious quality of cinema as something we viewers brush up against like another body. […] The very circulation of a film among different viewers is like a series of skin contacts that leave mutual traces' (2000: xi-xii). The very tactility of *La piel* is one of its most distinctive features; its luscious visual texture mirrors the surface of Vera's superskin. As viewers, we 'brush up against' Almodóvar's beautiful but monstrous creation, and may emerge momentarily scarred by its impact.

Vera's escape draws a final parallel between he/r and the hysterical patients at the Salpêtrière. One of Charcot's most popular subjects, a domestic servant named Augustine, spent five years in treatment at the hospital (1875-1880) after her mother's lover raped her at knifepoint. The trauma caused her to have seizures and nightmares,

for which she was treated with drugs, straitjackets, solitary confinement and hypnosis. An attractive young woman, Augustine was the most photographed of all Charcot's patients. She made many attempts to run away, and eventually succeeded by disguising herself as a man (Showalter 1997: 35).

The message at the heart of this film is about adaptability and survival: Almodóvar told *El País*:

> Un director de cine es lo más parecido a Dios, con todo un equipo a sus órdenes. El personaje de Antonio está muy cerca de ser ese creador, porque de pronto fabrica piel artificial. Es un tipo extremo, psicópata... y yo no soy exactamente así. En cuanto al de Anaya, es un papel de superviviente, y la supervivencia es el tema más antiguo del mundo (Belinchón 2011).[74]

One can almost hear the catchy beat of *Resistiré* as Vera walks away from he/r ordeal with a jaunty red leather jacket thrown on over he/r vintage dress – the perfect outfit for a character in a film that is, in some ways, itself an 'upcycled' vintage number.

By setting the action a tiny jump into the future from the present (at the time of release), Almodóvar highlights the fact that we are already living the reality of a society careening towards a genetically modified future. Bourgeois' strong presence in this film suggests that, in order to survive, we must find our solace and source of power through introspection and an embodied experience of the self: like Vera, we must allow art to be the guarantee of our sanity [Fig. 35]. The visual and physical language of art and sculpture is what fortifies Vera to finally escape the prison that frames he/r (and traps her) as an object of desire. She smashes through each of the 'Russian dolls' in order to step out of Ledgard's Sadean torture palace and back into a reality that appears to offer he/r the hope of an autonomous, integrated identity.

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[74] <http://cultura.elpais.com/cultura/2011/05/19/actualidad/1305756004_850215.html> [Accessed 3/3/17].

Figure 27: ***Art is a Guaranty of Sanity*****, Louise Bourgeois (2000).**

Chapter Four: The Wandering Womb

(*Caótica Ana,* Julio Medem, 2007)

Introduction: Caótica anima

> Time and again, the male confronts the female nude as an adversary whose independent existence as a physical or spiritual being must be assimilated to male needs, converted to abstractions, enfeebled, or destroyed (Duncan 1988: 59).

Ana is a film steeped in trauma, and director Julio Medem has been explicit that the narrative of this, his seventh feature, is rooted in his own personal suffering.[1] This contextual detail is an important factor in unpacking the film, for in the years preceding its release, Medem suffered the terrible blow that led to its genesis: the devastating death of his sister, Ana, in a traffic accident while en route to the first exhibition of her artwork in 2002. The following year, his documentary film *La pelota vasca: la piel contra la piedra* (2003), which explores the complex and tense political situation in his native Basque country, produced violently opposed reactions. With a view to helping end terrorism in the region, the film aimed to open up much needed dialogue between ETA and the Spanish State, but the undesired outcome was that Medem was criticised by both sides of the divide and 'the film reproduced the violent divisions he hoped it might erase' (J. Evans 2007a: 110). He was perceived to be at once pro- and anti- ETA, a paradox that J. Evans links to those explored in the director's fiction films up to this point, in which the fragility of individual identity is consistently highlighted, emphasising the space that exists between the way we see ourselves and the way that others see us, and serving to remind us of this precarious truth (2007a: 111-112).[2]

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[1] <http://elpais.com/diario/2007/08/12/eps/1186899346_850215.html> [Accessed 13/2/17].

[2] J. Evans writes that Medem's 'films consistently represent the fragility of individual identity' (2007a: 11), something that she and other critics (Gabilondo,

Ana continues in the same vein, problematising identity by foregrounding the tension between the self-defined self, and the self defined by historical and cultural context.[3] The jumble of political messages at the heart of the film, however, makes it a difficult film to discuss: as with *La pelota vasca*, Medem finds himself in murky waters, an apt metaphor for a director whose work is laden with aquatic symbolism.[4] Medem describes *Ana* as 'una oda a la lucha ancestral de la mujer' (Etxebeste Gómez 2010: 41), and although this may suggest a poetic attempt at a feminist project, this chapter argues that the end result is confused by its own position in a symbolic order that has shaped a perspective grounded in masculine privilege.[5] Huddleston found the film 'an agonising, infuriating experience, one of the most dreadful, shallow, cringe-inducing works of pseudo-art it has ever been my misfortune to endure' (2007).[6] His frustration revolves around the lack of plot and the failure (in his eyes) to engage with higher 'mystical and artistic realms' (Huddleston 2007).[7] That said, it is precisely these failings that make this film so relevant to this discussion of hysteria, grief, and desire.

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for example) discuss as relating to historically vulnerable Basque identity in relation to a more powerful, Castilian Spanish state, but useful here in thinking about the woman's body on screen within the lineage of the framed female nude.

[3] It picks up on recurring themes first established in *La ardilla roja* (1993) to do with identity, doubles, deceit, masks, and lost objects of desire (see Sànchez 1997 for more discussion).

[4] For example, the underwater opening sequence of *La ardilla roja*, 'symbolic of the watery depths of the human psyche' (J. Evans 2007a: 49), that Stone connects to that of *Lucía y el sexo* (2001): 'behind the credits is the familiar subjectivity of an underwater camera that recalls but rejects the opening of *La ardilla roja*, for here there is a clear evolution' (Stone 2007: 163).

[5] These are not new thematic goals – Medem's words in the English pressbook for *La ardilla roja* described it as 'una parabola contra el machismo en clave de comedia de misterio. Una ficción fabricada desde la psicología masculine, de la que se deduce una lección moral contra la relación de propiedad que el hombre ejerce sobre la mujer' (Angulo and Rebordinos 2004: 128).

[6] <http://www.notcoming.com/reviews/chaoticana> [Accessed 3/3/17].

[7] This is not the first time Medem's work has divided critical opinion. J. Evans summarises, 'contradictory responses divide his critics' and 'violently opposed critical reaction has always been a factor to which he says international success has gradually immunized him' (2007a: 10).

Medem's interest in psychoanalysis and metonymical symbolism has earned him a reputation as a screen poet. Smith refers to the director's 'poetics of everyday life' (2007: 33), and this, in combination with his medical training and interest in Freud, encourages us to adopt a psychoanalytical perspective when examining his films. Medem's interest in the mind manifests in the frequent use of water imagery (symbolic of the psyche) and the 'formal, poetic structure' (J. Evans 2007a: 109) of his work.[8] Medem describes this progression as follows:

> Por un lado comencé a interesarme por la mente humana, por la psique, y me plantee la posibilidad de ser psiquiatra, para lo que tenía que estudiar medicina. Y por otro lado, en cuanto al cine, que yo seguía sintiendo como algo que sólo haría para mí, empecé a ilusionarme con la idea de que esa pequeña máquina que es la cámara, me iba a permitir trasladar todo ese mundo poco accesible de los cuartos oscuros de la mente, a un plano más visible; intuí que con el artilugio cine iba a poder hacer consciente lo que estaba en el inconsciente. Pero insisto, me sentía más seguro sabiendo que iba a ser psiquiatra, un psiquiatra cineasta *amateur*, pero nunca director de cine (Angulo and Rebordinos 2005: 174).

As this demonstrates, Medem is driven by a desire to explore the darker corners of the human psyche, and his poetic cinematic language seems to have developed as a way of visually articulating this focus.

Stone views the personal nature of Medem's work as a carefully constructed form of auteurism 'that includes the films themselves and is integral to their reception' (2007: 3). *Ana* reads as a raw and angry wound through which its director tries to process personal grief, by attempting to connect with a more universal grief, that pays homage to female suffering. Spanish press coverage of the film's 'lengthy struggle to overcome personal and professional tragedy' led Smith to interpret this as a tactic to 'play up his own credentials as an auteur' (2007: 30). A cynical

[8] Angulo and Rebordinos also describe Medem's cinema as poetry rather than prose, noting that this is reflected in his dialogue, which often doesn't advance the plot but describes a feeling or a thought instead (Angulo and Rebordinos 2004: 24-25).

view, perhaps, but one that gets to the heart of the issue: *Ana* is at once a commemorative cry of grief and pain, and an attempt to gain back some professional credibility. These motives sit together uncomfortably, highlighting the conflicted interdependent relationship of art and commerce that is one of this film's recurring tropes, and that is embodied by Charlotte Rampling's character, Justine, patron of the arts and director of a school for gifted young artists in Madrid, which she invites Ana to join.

Medem's persona is therefore central to a film that presents Art as a midpoint between the worlds of empirical history and subjective internal life, which serves to draw the viewer into a realm of the mystical and magical real. Ana's paintings function as portals (both figuratively, then literally, when her painted doors 'open') between reality and fantasy. Neither explicitly surreal (in the Bretonian sense), like Buñuel, nor Gothic science fiction, like Almodóvar, *Ana* is more closely linked to magical realist narratives that unfold in a fantastical world of superstition and symbolism, designed to speak to an archaic source from which (the film suggests) the pace of contemporary existence has alienated us.[9] In *Cet obscur objet*, Conchita's two bodies are not formally acknowledged in the film, encouraging us to examine more directly our unconscious relationship to the objects of our desire. *La piel* takes place in a modern Gothic universe that is stranger than fiction yet deliberately anchored in present-day reality. In Medem's narrative, cataclysmic loss blows open the channel between these two worlds, and grief is folded into the experience of desire. Medem pits a 'fábula contra la tiranía del hombre blanco' (Etxebeste Gómez 2010: 149) – grounded in history and empiricism – against a timeless 'caos' that he locates (reductively, I will argue) with the archaic feminine. The tension between these internal and the external worlds provides the narrative impetus.

[9] J. Evans notes that 'Medem explores the fantastic without ever quite leaving the realms of the real' (2007a: 114).

Angulo and Rebordinos note that all Medem's plots are about the internal journeys of characters obsessed with and tormented by their incapacity to escape themselves and live in the real world, which he envisages as full of duality, doubles, and chance (2004: 19). Stone agrees, observing that 'Medem's characters typically embody a duality that is, characteristically for his films, exacerbated by their operating in both fantastic and real worlds' (2007: 44). Here, Medem cautions us via Justine, who states 'la historia nos une. Cada uno de nosotros somos también historia, la llevamos dentro, en lo más profundo de muestra [sic] memoria' (Medem 2007a: 39). Susan Martin-Márquez observes Ana's significant insistence that history is her weakest subject, noting that the pursuit of her artistic talent will lure her from her prehistoric Ibizan cave and 'plunge her into historical time' (2009: 7).

This chapter will highlight the way that hysteria functions productively to align these two worlds, but in a way that makes the representation of femininity in this film both provocative and problematic. Change the 'i' of Martin-Márquez's 'historia' for the 'y' of 'hysteria' and the statement shifts to illustrate what happens to Ana when she plunges into historical/hysterical time. According to the symbolic logic that frames this film narrative, the supposedly masculine drive of History is opposed to (and provokes) a hysteria that is historically identified as feminine, in spite of the fact that, as made clear in the earlier discussion of *Cet obscur objet*, Charcot also studied male hysteria. This film presents the eventual integration of both history and 'hystory' as the path to fulfilment.[10] The fact that, halfway through the film, we see a photograph of Ana bent into an hysterical arch confirms the relevance of this line of investigation. It is a reference so clear that its presence, Loxham argues, 'calls into question the naivety of the gender politics evidenced at other significant moments in the narrative' (2014: 91).

[10] We are reminded of Bourgeois' oft-repeated statement and piece, *Art is a guaranty of sanity* (2000). Art is able to act as a bridge between empirical Historical time, and intuitive hysterical time.

This chapter expands on Loxham's suggestion, exploring the symbolic parallels that may be drawn between: Justine's relationship with Ana (and the other artists under her patronage); Medem's relationship with his own cinematic creation; and that of Charcot to his hysterical patients at the Sâlpetrière.[11] All are, it could be argued, patrons and facilitators of a certain kind of madness, but are Justine and Medem really Charcots for the modern era? With reference to hysteria, Charcot, and the complexity of points of view represented in this film, this chapter will examine in depth the ways in which woman is, once again, represented as Irigaray's 'obliging prop for the enactment of men's fantasies' (1985: 25). Having noted the relationship of this film to personal grief, it is interesting to examine the extent to which Medem's portrait of Ana's chaos is doomed by the incompatibility of his attempt to situate history alongside a feminine 'hystory' that allows women to speak, with the definitive absence of his sister's voice.[12] It might also be suggested that this onscreen anima in turn provides Medem with a mask for his own hysteria, brought on by grief, which he channels through her. Is Ana, like Sofía (Emma Suarez) in *La ardilla roja*, 'another imagined female made real by the emotion invested in her by men' (Stone 2007: 71)?

Bearing in mind this aim to give voice to the silenced, and the well-established link between trauma and hysteria, we might replace the eponymous adjective 'caótica' with 'histérica', and turn our attention to a 'hysterical Ana' who is simultaneously a figure of presence and absence,

[11] As we shall come to see, chez Justine and 'chez Charcot' are parallel madhouses, one encouraging the delirium of hysteria and the other the delirium of art. Here, art is the platform for Ana's ultimately therapeutic journey.
[12] This contrast calls to mind Delueze and Guattari's nomad thought, which they outline as in opposition to History, which, they argue, is 'written from the sedentary point of view' (Deleuze and Guattari 2004: 25). They propose a 'Nomadology', 'the opposite of a history. […] What is important is not whether the flows are "One or multiple" – we're past that point: there is a collective assemblage of enunciation, a machinic assemblage of desire, one inside the other and both plugged into an immense outside that is a multiplicity in any case' (Deleuze and Guattari 2004: 25-26). This mode of thinking feels connected to the wandering hysterical womb, which also offers an alternative way of experiencing time and space.

both individual and archetype, homage and replica.[13] For Irigaray, the hysteric occupies the place of female absence in linguistic and cultural systems; her silence is produced by her absence in the dominant symbolic order, and so 'the silent or nonverbal "body language" of hysteria can be seen as a Mother Tongue that contests patriarchal culture' (Showalter 1997: 57). If we interpret this as Medem's grief-stricken 'ode' to femininity and an attempt to give voice to his lost sister via this 'Mother Tongue', we may also analyse Ana as a personification of the hysteric: a figure that, in Charcot's words, offers 'a first-hand experience, so to speak, of this pain' (Didi-Huberman 2003: 8).

This approach to Ana as to one of Charcot's patients underlines the central conflict in the *mise-en-scène* that I want to highlight here, which is 'the problem of the *violence of seeing* [original emphasis] in its scientific pretensions to experimentation on the body' (Didi-Huberman 2003: 8).[14] Like Charcot before him, Medem appears to offer us an opportunity to understand 'the crucial phenomenological problem of approaching the body of the Other and of the intimacy of its pain' (Didi-Huberman 2003: 8).

[13] A parallel with *La piel*, in that Vera is both homage to and replica of Gal, and much more besides.
[14] This quotation can of course be reflected back in relation to chapter three, as *La piel* illustrates and explores precisely this problem.

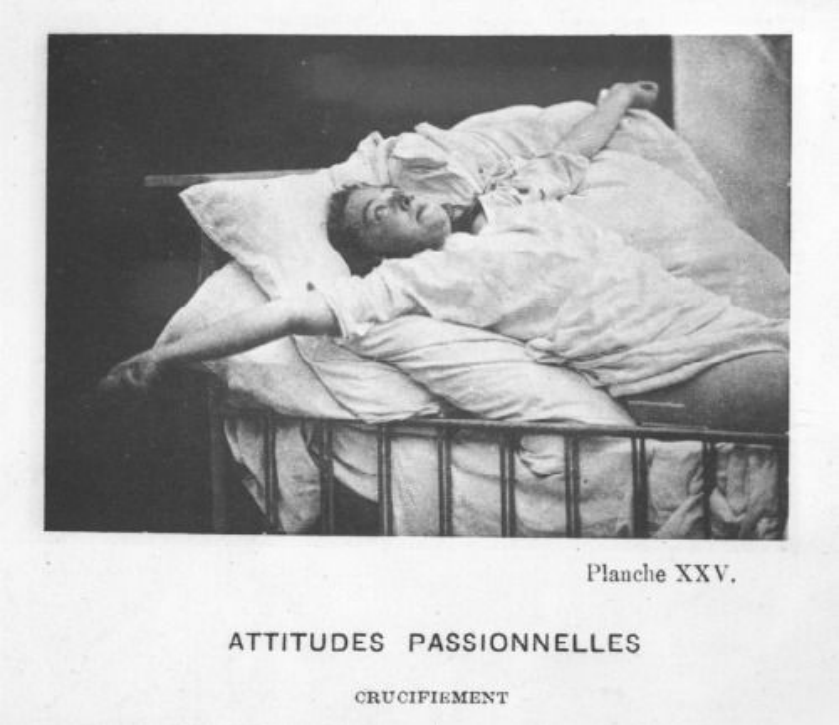

Figure 1: A figure from Charcot's *Iconographie*.

His camera enables us (quite literally) to approach Ana's body and experience pain (and pleasure) from inside her skin and her point of view, except that here, the pain is not the fictional Ana's, but Medem's. The aim is to interrogate the violent, historical gaze that relentlessly classes woman as its victim, but, as with *La pelota vasca*, it is the location of that camera (the position of Medem behind that gaze) that complicates things.

This chapter will focus on the conflict between the auteur director and an on-screen narrative that asserts, via Ana's filmmaker friend Linda (Bebe), that her camera is her 'ojo preferido' (Medem 2007a: 49). Linda's camera (and the films she makes of Ana's hypnosis sessions) propose the literal feminist reclamation of the gaze, but her dialogue simultaneously espouses a simplistic hysterical/historical view of men as 'rapists' and women as 'whores': her first words onscreen (in conversation with Ana) are, 'los tíos son un asco. Una gran polla de pie, eso es un tío. Sólo se mueven por el sexo. En el fondo son todos unos

violadores' (Medem 2007a: 46).[15] Linda's position echoes Mulvey's view that 'the look, pleasurable in form, can be threatening in content' (1999: 837), and that 'the power to subject another person to the will sadistically or to the gaze voyeuristically is turned on to the woman as the object of both' (1999: 841).[16] Given the crudeness of Linda's viewpoint, after the brief synopsis we shall go on to examine in more detail how this position is problematic, with reference to the 'authorial' eye in this text. *Ana* interrogates the status of the female form as the default subject of Art, charting 'her story' as an object of the gaze that gradually becomes conscious and develops a sense of agency: however, as I will argue here, the fact that 'woman' remains the object of the wider film narrative – one constructed in the context of a mainstream cinema that 'coded the erotic into the language of the dominant patriarchal order' (Mulvey 1999: 834) – significantly complicates the question of female agency.

[15] Recalling Bataille's theory in *Eroticism* (2006) that women are always the 'victim'.

[16] Linda can also, however, be interpreted as another woman who is in fact passive, embodying woman as passive recipient of male desire but aligning with Kaplan's description of the woman 'at one remove, as *watching* a woman who is passive recipient of male desires and sexual actions' (1988: 26).

Synopsis

> Linda: Es que ha habido mucho machista violador hijo de puta en tu vida. En tus vidas (Medem 2007a: 87).[17]

Ana contains so many of the motifs and concerns now associated with Medem that it could almost be read as a parody: journeys, natural landscape, islands, psychoanalysis and the unconscious, *l'amour fou*, cyclical violence, mysticism, animals and their points of view, the fundamental instability of identity, masculine versus feminine, sex, desire, trauma, and wider social comment.[18] The 'chaos' of Ana's internal world is reflected in the film's bewildering array of geographically diverse and iconic locations: the action begins in the Balearic Islands and ends in New York, via Madrid, the Atlantic ocean, and Arizona, whilst Ana's visions and flashbacks transport us to the Sahara desert and the mountain, K2.[19] Smith describes Medem as 'a filmmaker steeped in fantasy and formal experiment' (2007: 31) and *Ana* exemplifies his proclivity for complex narrative composition. With hypnosis as its guiding principle, *Ana* is structurally organised around a countdown backwards from ten to zero. This is articulated by numerical intertitles (white numbers on black screens) that are interspersed between the different episodes in Ana's inner and outer life.

The action moves in opposing chronological directions: forwards for Ana's 'real', external world and backwards to trace her slowly awakening consciousness, as she undergoes hypnosis and finds her

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[17] Quotations are taken from the film's script where it matches what is onscreen, and where it doesn't, the dialogue is copied down correctly and marked as such.
[18] Medem's 'on-going exploration of the human psyche has led to the production of a documentary on schizophrenia, *Uno por ciento, esquizofrenia*, written and directed by Ione Hernández, and his next fiction film, *Caótica Ana*' (J. Evans 2007a: 10).
[19] By comparison, Medem's next feature, *Habitación en Roma* (2010), is small and closed in on itself, the polar opposite of the wide-reaching ambitions of *Ana*. A connected global community is evoked by internet maps, diverse origins (one of the protagonists is Russian, the other Spanish), and the fact it is shot in English. The onscreen action remains firmly rooted in the hotel room in Rome where the two lovers stage their brief encounter.

inability to dream lifted.[20] It is introduced by one of Medem's trademark 'strikingly metonymical' (J. Evans 2007a: 48) visual allegorical establishing sequences: a dove defecates on a falcon's eyes, blinding it, before the bird of prey, released by its handler, then kills its incidental assailant in revenge.[21] The countdown begins: Ana (Manuela Vellés) lives on Ibiza with her German father, Klaus (Matthias Habich). Abandoned by her mother years earlier, Ana and her father enjoy a primitive but apparently idyllic and hippy existence living in a cave on the island. Ana's youthful freedom is emphasised by clichéd (and traditionally framed heterosexual 'male gaze') shots of her swimming naked, revelling in drug-fuelled hedonistic nightlife, and lost in beach contemplation. She sells the naïve, colourful pieces she paints at a local market, where she is discovered by Justine, a French patron of the arts.

Justine invites Ana to study at her residential art school in Madrid, and encourages her to explore her talents, improve her technique, and learn new skills. In Madrid, Ana falls immediately and passionately in love with fellow student Said (Nicolas Cazalé), who has existential panic attacks and whose work is defined by his Berber ancestry, love of science and faith in empirical evidence. By contrast, Ana, driven by her imagination rather than intellectual or emotional depth, creates playfully ingenuous and literally two-dimensional work.

At the school, Ana befriends Linda, a feminist video artist, who is never without the camera through which she prefers to see the world. One evening, while out to supper with Justine, the group meets a famous

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[20] Rachel Bachner-Melman and Pesach Lichtenberg describe how, for Freud, dreams and hypnosis both offer access to forgotten material (2001: 39).

[21] This sequence is a visualization of an essay Medem wrote that accompanied *La pelota vasca,* entitled 'Un pájaro vuela dentro de una garganta'. <http://www.juliomedem.org/filmografia/archivos/pelota_memoria.pdf> [Accessed 3/3/17]. Defecating animals recur in Medem's cinema as a playful attack on patriarchal masculine delusions (the shitting squirrel in *La ardilla roja*, for example). The dove and hawk symbolism references the opposing war imagery that emerged around the Vietnam war but surfaced once again during the Iraq war of 'war hawks' vs 'war doves': <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2002/sep/10/iraq.sarahleft> [Accessed 13/2/17].

female hypnotist and her young American protégé, Anglo, and Ana agrees to be hypnotised by him. As her hypnotist, Anglo becomes Ana's main onscreen 'interpreter', and as such Medem devolves control of the narrative in part to Linda's mechanical eye, and in part to Anglo's special skills. This detail, alongside Said's insistence on scientific proof, presents the empirical world as masculine and sets it up against a primeval feminine chain that is closely connected to animals and nature, a common thread for Medem's cinema in general. Through hypnotic sessions with Anglo that are recorded on camera by Linda, Ana discovers that she has many past lives, but more significantly, many past deaths: in every one of these previous lives, 'she' has come to a violently premature end at the hands of a man: the eternally symbolic falcon to her (incidentally defecating) dove.[22]

Said then disappears, and Ana's father dies. She discovers that in one of her past lives she was a Berber warrior, strengthening the bond she already feels with the now absent Said. Distraught at the loss of her lover, Ana leaves Madrid for a new life in New York, hitching a ride on a boat belonging to Linda's father Ismael (Lluís Homar), a notorious womaniser, in a conflicted bid both to escape and find Said. Anglo tracks Ana down by speaking to Ismael and finds her (implausibly easily) sitting in Washington Square, where he persuades her to let him assist her in taking one last hypnotic journey to her ancient origins. They drive through the Arizona desert to an Indian reservation, where they meet Justine and, returning to another cave, Ana prepares to be hypnotised again in order to travel back further than ever before – 2,000 years, this time – to discover her origin story. Linda and her camera are not with them, meaning that, unlike the others, the diegetic recording of this session is not framed by the female gaze. Ana's hypnosis reveals that she was Osdad Ciaca, an ancient Hopi bird goddess who is usurped and

[22] Medem and Manuela Vellés themselves submitted to hypnosis in preparation (Smith 2007: 31).

murdered by a male lover who is jealous of her essential power and wants it for himself.

After the penultimate intertitle, 1, Ana is living her New York life, opening up the creperie where she works. Her hair has been cut and dyed into a sharp, black bob reminiscent of Uma Thurman's iconic and seductive Mia Wallace in Quentin Tarantino's *Pulp Fiction* (1994). Faithful to Medem's love of chance as a plot device and restating the theme of *amour fou*, one morning, Said knocks on the door.[23] They go to make love, but he can't become aroused, and eventually tells Ana why he disappeared – he realised that in one of her past lives she was his mother, a prominent Berber woman whose soul was connected to many wise female Amazigh predecessors (a twist we now see was alluded to during their first sex scene, 24 minutes in, with a shot-reverse shot of Said cradled in Ana's lap sucking her nipple). She and her husband, Said's father, were imprisoned in a Moroccan camp then left in the desert to be eaten alive by birds so that her ancient soul might be released.[24] The only thing returned to her people was her ring, which Said puts on Ana's finger before they both fall asleep. When Ana awakes, Said has left.

The countdown finally at zero, in the last sequence Ana is working as a waitress in an upmarket New York restaurant. One day, an American politician responsible for the Iraq war, Mister Halcón (Gerrit Graham), eats alone in the restaurant's private dining room. Ana waits on his table, and seduces him, later going to his room where they begin to undress. Ana then positions her body over him and defecates on his face, mirroring the exchange between the dove and the falcon in the opening sequence, and reinforcing the political implications of Medem's choice of avian symbolism.[25] Mister Halcón furiously beats Ana up, partly

[23] Medem's use of coincidence, chance, and *amour fou* are all surrealist traits.
[24] This scene strongly recalls the imagery at the end of Buñuel's *Un chien andalou* where the two lovers' bodies are buried up to their chest in sand and left to decay in the hot sun.
[25] J. Evans uses Medem's own term 'secuencia cero' to encapsulate his habitual use of opening sequences as carefully choreographed 'visual lures'. These

(reluctantly) aided by his hyper-masculine bodyguard (Giacomo Gonnella). Unlike in her past lives, however, Ana survives the brutality and emerges triumphant into the streets of New York. Bloodied and bruised, as she walks towards the camera, Ana passes the Jim Dine sculptures that stand on Sixth Avenue, *Looking Towards the Avenue* (1989)*:* three giant female nudes inspired by the *Venus de Milo*. There are echoes of the 'Russian doll' motif discussed in the previous chapter in this vision of a woman containing hidden multiples of herself: in Ana's case, the breaking open of each 'doll' (or repressed memory) has taken us further back in time. The final 'doll' is Osdad Ciaca, the original woman in the chain to be murdered by a man who was jealous of her power.[26]

From dreadlocked cave-dwelling *indígena* to Tarantino-esque dominatrix, Ana shape-shifts internally and externally; her physical evolution towards an image that is externally more 'civilised' is noteworthy, while, as the film counts down backwards, she is discovering (conversely) ever more primitive internal, unconscious identities. Emerging into New York City, a metropolis synonymous with self-determination, Ana leaves the protective island womb-cave and travels from unconscious to conscious in this perverse, and, as we shall now go on to examine in more detail, hysterical bildungsroman.

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cinematic overtures draw the viewer into his diegetic universe (2007a: 108) and instruct her in how to receive it. In Medem's own words: 'Yo siempre intento en los primeros minutos de cada pelicula mostrar al espectador por dónde tiene que asomarse a la historia. Le digo: *"Mira por aquí, por favor".* Voy mostrando, voy plasmando un estado, un tono, una atmósfera narrative para decirle que la película tiene una Mirada, para indicarle dónde se tiene que situar' (Angulo and Rebordinos 2004: 177).

[26] This ancient mother figure provides a link to Haraway's cyborg, as discussed in chapter three: 'En la argumentación teórica de Haraway, la Madre no fue Eva, antes de comer la fruta prohibida, sino la Malinche, la princesa azteca amante de Hernán Cortés, que aprende la lengua del hombre conquistador y traduce, adopta la tecnología de la traducción' (Sánchez-Mesa 2014: 179). Pertinent to this story of ultimate survival and triumph over evil, Sánchez-Mesa goes on to describe Malinche as 'una maestra en la superviviencia' (2014: 80), a phrase that could equally apply to Ana.

Medem and Linda's camera: personal and phenomenological visions

> But when I *seek* (myself), *lose* (myself), or experience *jouissance* – then "I" is *heterogeneous* (Kristeva 1989: 9).

Medem's cinema is anchored in a phenomenological experience of the physical world that, like Kristeva's comment above, is also rooted in the search for *jouissance*, or heterogeneity.[27] His eclectic cinematography includes shots from the points of view of animals, as well as shots that are close up to (and sometimes inside) the skin of his various protagonists. In this film, Medem also mediates both the viewer's gaze and the directorial gaze via Linda's digital camera. This subjective mediation is worth dealing with first, as it is something so fundamental to the narrative that we shall return to it throughout this discussion. These are, at once, deeply personal and philosophical film narratives that strive to explore the most fundamental questions: who are we? Why are we here? What constitutes the self? What is love? What is desire?[28] Medem's much praised first film, *Vacas* (1992), marked out the complex visual and narrative territory that would become his trademark, identifying him as the author of cinematic narratives of 'the intangible and the irrational' (J. Evans 2007a: 109) that deploy distinctive, signature recurring themes and cinematographic tropes including an emphasis on the haptic and embodied aspects of onscreen experience.

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[27] Catherine Marchak summarises the connection between *jouissance* and the abject as follows: 'This "joy," however, is not the pleasure that once can experience in the prosaic world; in the homogenous world, joy and pleasure arrive from attaining some *object*, something tangible or definable, while jouissance arises from seeking the *abject*, a non-object. The search for this pseudo-object, the abject, leads to excluded ground, the ground that has been excluded by paternally-imposed prohibitions, taboos and law' (original emphasis) (1990: 360).

[28] J. Evans draws a further parallel between Medem and the surrealists via Medem's focus on the point of view, which, she argues, 'has its origins in early twentieth-century surrealism. His narratives, like those of the surrealists, highlight the fact that a world that appears ordered, rational and empirical, may be disrupted at any moment by the unconscious and irrational' (2007a: 43).

As discussed, Medem, like Almodóvar, directly references the hysterical *arc-en-cercle* in his *mise-en-scène.* Ana is first depicted bent back into a pose that reads as reference to the arch in one of the film's opening scenes, where we see her in a club in her native Ibiza, high on drugs and dancing ecstatically in an expression of pure *jouissance*.

Figure 2: Ana in (and on) ecstasy, dancing against a hallucinatory, horned man.

In Lacanian terminology, *jouissance* is an experience of intense pleasure that seeks to move beyond the pleasure principle to such excess that it becomes also painful; the ecstasy and agony of desire taken to its most simultaneously torturous and delirious outer limit, 'a pleasure that is excessive, leading to a sense of being overwhelmed or disgusted, yet simultaneously providing a source of fascination' (Fink 1995: xii).[29] In this way it connects with Bataille's erotic philosophy in which violence is an inherent element of sexual experience, and is understood to also have the power to unsettle classifications and traverse boundaries: the experience of *jouissance* is fundamentally transgressive. If hysteria truly is 'a mimetic disorder' that 'mimics culturally permissible expressions of

[29] For Jane Gallop, 'jouissance has a power, the power to unsettle foundations and classifications, to shake up ideology' (1984: 112).

distress' (Showalter 1997: 15), then can we not see the hysterical arch as an expression of distress evolved to be sexually compelling? An echo of the orgasmic spasm, and proffered as an apparatus that might facilitate the male hunter's launching of an arrow (or ejaculation) far away in an attempt to resolve and/or escape his feelings of grief. In this way the hysteric can be read simultaneously as the lost object, the object of desire, and the object of medical curiosity.[30]

Their presence confirmed and facilitated by their absence, these lost, longed-for objects manifest as tantalising empty spaces that call their relative subjects into being and into action. Desire is a productive force that provides a powerful engine for Medem's narratives, and one of his cinematic tropes is the frequent use of holes that function as 'thresholds and gateways to trajectories of discovery or as cavities ready to be fed and filled' (Santaolalla 1998: 333). They are primarily associated with the feminine. His desire is to 'crear realidades que estuvieran perforadas, mundos nacidos de la realidad, pero con un hueco por el que te puedas ir' (Medem in J. Evans 2007a: 19). Stone elaborates:

> A retrospective analysis of Medem's fictions demands an Alice-like journey down this hole to pass through *La ardilla roja*, *Tierra* and *Los amantes del Círculo Polar* in order to emerge into sunlight through the hole that exists at the centre of *Lucía y el sexo* (2007: 40).

Here, we are again 'reincarnated' as Ana, blinking in the Balearic sunlight before taking a trip down the next rabbit hole, except this time we shall be going backwards. As we saw from the synopsis, this incarnation of 'Alice'/Ana begins ensconced in her Ibizan cave, then slowly falls paradoxically backwards and down through time, and up and outwards

[30] Pavlović quotes Williams' observation that, in heterosexual pornography, the female body in a spasm of wild and overwhelming ecstasy offers the most thrilling sight (2003: 116).

into Medem's fictional view of contemporary civilization.[31] In addition, the emphasis on female experience in this film indicates clearly that these holes are not simply narrative but embodied. Medem says that he 'asimilaba el sexo de la mujer con una zona húmeda, cavernosa pero al mismo tiempo como un lugar puro y erótico' (in Etxebeste Gómez 2010: 72), demonstrating a distinctly embodied, both Freudian and Lacanian, view of woman configured as simultaneously achingly desirable lack, cavernous womb, and, more importantly here, still conflated with traditionally reductive heterosexual male notions of the female sex with purity: 'un lugar puro y erótico'.

Onscreen Ana-as-lack is the 'problem', the 'enigma needing to be resolved' in this film. Her absence is simultaneously invoked and renounced, and is profoundly complicated by the use of original paintings by Medem's sister, Ana Medem. This 'naively colourful' (Smith 2007: 30) work plays a vital role in the diegesis and it takes on deeper significance when placed in the context of her tragic, premature death.[32] Ana Medem is metonymically represented in this film through her art, but she is also, of course, quite literally missing from the narrative. Her paintings serve partially to fill the hole that is at the heart of the onscreen version of Ana that is here complicated by grief and the sibling relationship. Her fictional character may be read as both homage and an attempt to fill the traumatic void left by her death. Her paintings (re)state the commemorative intention by ensuring that the lost sister adorns and haunts this narrative.[33] For the animated sequences, Medem's other sister, Sophia, created images in the style of Ana Medem to support and

[31] Martin-Márquez (2009: 296) highlights the importance of rebirth in Medem's body of work, and also found the director's treatment of gender politics to be crude (there is no other way to describe them).
[32] Within the narrative, Justine describes Ana's work the same way: 'Ana, te recomiendo que aprendas a pintar al oleo. Las ceras dan un aire muy naif a tus cuadros' (Medem 2007a: 57).
[33] John Foster notes that Ana Medem also inspired the characters of Ana in *Amantes* and Lucía in *Lucía* (2008: 2).

extend this narrative (and the sibling) connection.[34] This emphasises an intimate connection with Medem's life, whilst providing a clue and a context to some of the film's more chaotic idiosyncrasies and weaker points.

Of all his film narratives, this may be the one Medem found most difficult to distance himself from, and therefore the one in which he is most confined by his own narrative limitations. Greater emotional distance might have allowed more insight into the influence wielded on us by the restrictive confines of Lacan's symbolic order of cultural paradigms (mediated by language), which reinforce essentialist and reductive gender stereotypes. Engaging, as it does, with hysteria, this narrative approaches a disorder understood to be 'symbolic of women's silencing within the institutions of language, culture, and psychoanalysis' (Showalter 1997: 56). This symbolic absence of (and repression of) the feminine by a patriarchal symbolic order that reproduces hysterical attacks (on that order itself) illustrates the extent to which we are confined by the symbolic.

For all his good intentions, I shall argue that, in spite of handing some of the narrative development over to a female alter-ego (Linda), Medem seems unable to escape the fact of his own construction within that same order. His personal mythology instinctively and insistently situates the feminine on the side of the 'natural' and the 'divine'. In Ana, he presents us with a female protagonist constructed as a riddle, then hands the job of deciphering her over to a young, white male. In spite of its noble desire to draw attention to humanity's shameful history of gender based violence and to give absent women a voice, the film's gender politics are laden with dangerous clichés and stereotypes that are at best disappointing and misguided, and at worst regressive and crude, as emphasised by Linda's black and white views. Does her rudimentary perspective represent a critique on the limits of vulgar feminism? It

[34] <https://www.closeupfilmcentre.com/vertigo_magazine/volume-3-issue-8-winter-2008/chaos-theories/> [Accessed 3/3/17].

certainly exposes the flaws of a rigid feminism that replicates internalised patriarchal ideology and casts women as 'whores'. Greater awareness might in turn facilitate a wider perspective leading to a more nuanced understanding of subject matter as sensitive as the historic oppression of women by patriarchy. Having said that, the problems posed by this film suggest this is something worth examining in more depth.

Medem's habit of including intimate details in his fictional narratives is not new: as has frequently been noted, he has always woven his personal life into his filmmaking.[35] Each narrative film preceding *Ana* is also dedicated to a family member: *Vacas* (1992) to his then wife, Lola; *La ardilla roja* (1993) to his daughter Alicia; *Tierra* (1996) to his son Peru (who in fact plays the young Otto in *Los amantes del círculo polar*); *Los amantes del círculo polar* (1998) to his German father; and *Lucía y el sexo* (2001) to his partner, Montse. Medem has spoken in interviews about his childhood fascination with film, and with the videos made by his amateur film-maker father. He has described how these film texts began to intersect with his memories, illustrating 'the notion that film can filter into and gradually replace memory' (J. Evans 2007a: 13) that is central to his work. Medem's decision to portray his sister onscreen via her paintings is a gesture typical of this interest in family narratives and of his attraction to the blurred boundary between reality and fiction. For viewers aware of her death, Medem's grief is in plain sight: the on-screen Ana functions as a fetish substitute for Ana Medem. For Mulvey, fetishism:

> [B]roadly speaking, involves the attribution of *self-sufficiency* and *autonomous powers* to a manifestly 'man'-derived object. It is, therefore, dependent on the ability to disavow what is known and

[35] Stone observes, 'Medem has aspired to a concept of auteurism that is based upon the highly personal connections to his films' (2007: 209); in her discussion of *Tierra*, J. Evans notes that the parallels between Medem's life as described in interviews and the film diegesis 'can seem uncanny' (2007a: 14); Medem discusses the autobiographical elements in his cinema with The Guardian's Dan Glaister: <https://www.theguardian.com/film/2000/jan/05/artsfeatures> [Accessed 3/3/17].

> replace it with belief and the suspension of disbelief. On the other hand, *the fetish is always haunted by the fragility of the mechanisms that sustain it* (1996: 7-8, emphasis added).

Ana may be interpreted, similarly, as a manifestly '"man"-derived object' that relies on the suspension of disbelief of both Medem and his audience. And here, I want to examine more closely the fragile mechanisms sustaining it/her by looking more closely at the filmic conceits employed, such as the tropes of hysteria, past lives, and hypnosis, and the *mises-en-abîme* of Linda's films that mediate the masculine gaze.[36]

Medem's express desire is, as we saw above, to represent the hidden corners of the conscious mind onscreen. He is fascinated with the camera as a vehicle for this translation of internal, unfathomable experience to an external platform that may then speak to the collective consciousness of his viewers as much as to that of the individual. Consequently, (and in symbolic conjunction with the role of hypnosis within the diegetic world) cinematography here performs as therapy, moving in a double direction. And, just as the psychoanalytic project impacts on both analyst and analysand, so too does the act of training the camera's artificial eye on a subject or object effect both the 'looker' and the 'looked-at'. The camera facilitates the translation of memories and the unconscious, but it also enables us to decipher it out in the open, so to speak.

The paternal videos that are entwined with Medem's childhood memories have been updated and re-cast for a contemporary audience in Linda's compact digital camera, demonstrating the relative ease with which we may now all employ a 'third eye' (to use an appropriately mystical term for this film) to record the world around us from our singular point of view, as director, editor and producer of our own daily

[36] Walusinsksi explains that a conceptual shift led Charcot 'to assimilate hysteria with hypnosis' (2014: 74).

experience.[37] The film makes it clear that Linda's perspective is motivated by political beliefs that are reinforced by what she chooses to record. Filmed events, relatively rare in Medem's 1960s childhood, now play an important role in the way we structure our subjective reality, encouraged and facilitated by the relative ease and convenience of digital recording. That these digital documents (like his father's analogue videos) intersect with and sometimes replace actual memories is encapsulated in Linda's recordings of Ana's hypnotic sessions. Here, however, the additional layer of fictional hypnosis means that Linda's films document experiences retrieved from Ana's unconscious, of which she is, naturally (and in the case of this film narrative, also supernaturally), unaware.[38] Gathered from the third person perspective of the director's (Medem, via Linda's) 'bird's eye view', these digital testimonies can (and do) replace the time 'lost' while Ana is under hypnosis, and the integration of these missing pieces of the puzzle is presented here as crucial to the gradual integration of the self/selves that Ana embodies.[39]

Showalter notes that 'Charcot defined hysteria as a physical illness caused by a hereditary defect or traumatic wound in the central nervous system that gives rise to epileptiform attacks' (1997: 30), and the connection between amnesia and trauma is well established. In her study *Trauma, A Genealogy*, Ruth Leys writes:

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[37] This encourages us to reflect on our own posthumanity: the development of social media and smartphones has created generations of cyborgs with cameras constantly attached to their hands who, like Linda, are recording everything, and experience their daily life mediated by a digital screen. In many ways these tools have, as Loxham points out, democratised the process of filmmaking (2014: 91), but they have also encouraged a cult of the individual that values the reinstatement of its own point of view above experiencing that of others.

[38] 'A hysterical woman heads straight for total dispossession in hypnotic submission; she is as accommodating in her own fascination as a little bird in front of a snake that is about to devour it: an ideal predation' (Did-Huberman 2003: 187).

[39] J. Evans notes that Medem used to take his father's video camera and secretly make his own films with his sister, Ana, in the family kitchen, which adds another layer of emotional complexity to the making of this film that is about and dedicated to her (2007a: 13).

> If the victim of a trauma identifies with the aggressor, she does so not as a defense of the ego that represses the violent event into the unconscious, but on the basis of an unconscious imitation or mimesis that connotes an abyssal openness to all identification. This would explain why the traumatic event cannot be remembered, indeed why it is "relived" in the transferential relationship not in the form of a recounting of a past event but of a hypnotic identification with another in the present – in the timelessness of the unconscious – that is characterized by a profound amnesia or absence from the self. It would also suggest an explanation, grounded in Freud's conception of trauma as the archetrauma of identification, of why the victim's memory of the traumatic event is so often difficult if not impossible to recover (something Freud appears to recognize when, in discussing the interminableness of analysis, he acknowledges the implacable nature of the death drive, or compulsion to repeat) (2000: 32-33).

Medem envisions this 'implacable' death drive as violence enacted by men on women throughout history, and, as we shall come to see, Ana's pre-hypnosis amnesia may read as a hysterical blindness induced by a relentless trauma that is disrupted when she eventually 'remembers' and can therefore break the chain of traumatic repetition, providing a symbol of survival.[40] Here, the film's *mise-en-scène* suggests it is *jouissance* that facilitates this remembering – a complex experience that, as Kristeva explains in this section's epigraph, takes the individual from homogeneity to heterogeneity. Trauma also lies at the heart of Bourgeois' body of work, which, as Mitchell describes, 'captures the shock of trauma and gives permanence to its moment, fighting against the trap of its ceaseless repetition in what psychoanalysis knows as the "repetition compulsion".' (2014: 14).

Until she meets Said, Ana does not dream, signifying an unconscious that is so repressed as to appear inactive. When dancing in the Ibizan club, Ana's drug induced ecstasy appears to let in symbols of her repressed multiplicity, momentarily connecting her to the past lives

[40] Bogousslavsky comments on the 'astonishing modernity' (2000: 53) of Charcot's thinking regarding hysteria, asserting that 'Charcot was the initiator of the traumatic theory lying behind hysteria, even emphasizing strong sexual factors 20 years before Freud. This issue also made him one of the earliest proponents of male hysteria' (2000: 53-54).

and other identities that make up her heterogeneous nature. As will become clear, it is her later encounter with Said, the object of Ana's desire, which fully opens this channel between her conscious and unconscious mind. These repressed identities are then brought fully to light via the process of hypnosis and the recordings made by Linda's artificial eye.

Interestingly, modern science has offered proof of a link between the practice of hypnosis and the symptoms of hysteria: 'functional MRI studies have also confirmed one of Charcot's most cherished claims, i.e. the closeness of hypnotism with hysteria' (Bogousslavsky 2014: 54).[41] Hypnosis is its own form of 'look', a guided *observation* of the subject that turns its gaze inward in order to access the unconscious and unlock the many secrets and traumas that reside there; hypnosis enables the patient to 'look' across gulfs created by time and space with a gaze that defies chronology. Here, we can draw a clear parallel between doctor and director: via his dynamic camera that adopts different perspectives and points of view, climbing inside the skins of various characters (and animals), Medem grants his viewer a momentary feeling of mastery over a variety of his subjects, enabling them to try certain things out from more than one point of view (for example, the sex scene between Said and Ana, which is experienced from both the masculine and feminine perspectives).

Freud describes the hypnotic process as submission to the will of a master that eventually takes the place of the ideal ego, and Didi-Huberman summarises that Freud 'speaks of hypnosis now as *love*, now as *thaumaturgy*, and almost always as *violence*: a certain idea of art, between charm and cruelty' (2003: 233). It is exactly here, on this axis between charm and cruelty, that *Ana* lies.[42] Much like the film director,

[41] See Bogousslavsky for a discussion of 'the dynamic mechanism behind hysteria' (2000: 54).

[42] Bruce Lawrence and Aisha Karim underline that Freud's work with Charcot and Josef Breuer focussed initially on hysteria and hypnosis (2007: 226). In 1885-6, Freud spent four months observing Charcot's studies of hypnotism at the Salpêtrière, and 'was impressed with clinical demonstrations that hysterical

whose camera is able to stage a discourse between many temporal strands from past, present, and future, the hypnotist is able to guide their patient to do the same. That this guided process of 'looking' inward might, according to Freud, itself be considered violent carries extra significance here in the context of a film that charts the ancient cycle of men's violence against women. Could Anglo's analysis of Ana be simply another form of structural violence? And is the analysis and deconstruction of a text (which, in the psychoanalytic project, includes people as text) inherently violent?

Lebeau writes that 'a preoccupation with the power of the visual (image, hallucination) and the effects of fascination (hypnosis, identification) is shared between psychoanalysis and cinema' (2006: 7). Both cinematic viewing and hypnosis require a certain amount of submission to the mastery of an other, be it a doctor, hypnotist, or film director: here, the viewer submits not only to Medem, but also within the diegesis to Anglo (hypnotist) and Linda (meta-film director).[43] In this way the viewer's experience of *Ana* is powerfully aligned with the onscreen experience of Ana herself.[44]

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paralyses could be reproduced by hypnotic suggestion' (Bachner-Melman and Lichtenberg 2001: 37). In Vienna, Freud's contemporary and friend Joseph Breuer was using hypnosis to regress hysterical patients in time in order to 'trace the origin of their symptoms and evoke normally inaccessible memories' (Bachner-Melman and Lichtenberg 2001: 37-8) (Freud, 1893/1966, p.149). Freud eventually rejected hypnosis, although acknowledged that it had paved the way for psychoanalysis (Bachner-Melman and Lichtenberg 2001: 39). About hypnosis, Foucault wrote: 'neither hypnosis, nor the patient's alienation within the fantasmatic character of the doctor, is constitutive of psychoanalysis; …the latter can be deployed only in the calm violence of a particular relationship and the transference it produces… Psychoanalysis makes use of the particular relation of the transference in order to reveal, on the outer confines of representation, Desire, Law, and Death, which outline, at the extremity of analytic language and practice, the concrete figures of finitude' (2002: 411).

[43] It is this submission of will to suggestion that Freud finds violent – on witnessing Bernheim's 'arts', Freud writes 'I said to myself that this was an evident injustice and an act of violence' (2013: 35).

[44] Showalter explains that 'Charcot saw hysteria as an organic disease, whereas Freud defined it as "a neurosis caused by repression, conflicted sexuality, and fantasy"' (1997: 37-38), which is clearly relevant in this story about plumbing one's own depths and opening one's internal locked doors.

In this film, the fictional role of hypnosis connects 'Ana' to her former 'selves'. This is interesting in relation to the connection that has been noted between Medem and his fictional alter egos – philosophically inclined beta males with shoulder length black hair who struggle with traditional expectations of masculinity. If we recall Buñuel's recurring cinematic alter ego/everyman, Fernando Rey, like Buñuel's, Medem's onscreen alter-ego is not idealised, but offers, rather, a self-reflexive insight into offbeat (Medem) or fading (Buñuel) masculinity. The recurrence of actors that physically resemble the director (Nancho Novo and Carmelo Gómez) in the cyclical structure of Medem's diegetic worlds ensures the hazy frontier between his lived and his fictional narratives.[45]

In *Ana,* Linda and her digital camera are a clear comment on the gaze, and her films are a *mise-en-abîme* that represent the female gaze, and thereby complicate the process of looking more directly here than in Medem's earlier fiction films. Throughout his work, Medem has attempted to include female 'narrators' of the action – for example, the letters between the half-sibling lovers in *Vacas*; the female perspective explored in *La ardilla*, *Lucía y el sexo,* and *Habitación en Roma* (2010); in *Tierra,* Mari's alternate 'diary' that was never filmed; alternating between the male and female protagonists' point of view in *Amantes del círculo polar* – and often problematises the tension between the masculine, patriarchal drive to 'write' women (*La ardilla*'s Jota inventing amnesiac Sofia's life to suit his own ends, writer Lorenzo's authorial power over (or lack thereof) the women in *Lucía*) and the feminine that at some point resists this

[45] For example: the various Irigibel men played by Carmelo Gómez in *Vacas*; La *ardilla*'s Jota (Nancho Novo) and his violent counterpart, Félix (Carmelo Gómez); *Tierra*'s Angel (Carmelo Gómez again); and here, Said, played by Nicolas Cazalé. For more on the proximity of Medem's work to his life see Stone (2007), where he explores the effect of this repetitive casting on the director's body of work, describing how it 'has created a constant notion of the alter ego in his films' (2007: 47); 'Ángel's angelic *alter ego* is […] an extension of the *doppelgänger* motif established in the relationship between Félix and Jota in *La ardilla*' (J. Evans 2007a: 72).

control.[46] Stone has written about the limitations on these female perspectives:

> In *Vacas* the females had suffered the status of cows without the privilege of providing their perspective on events, while the authenticity of Sofia's view of events in *La ardilla roja* was only discernible in retrospect from the vantage point of knowing the twist in the tale. *Tierra* had neglected the female frame of mind altogether; but *Los amantes del Círculo Polar* has it in perfect half-measure, for Ana is a protagonist who does not depend upon the male gaze for validation at the same time as she embodies the paradox of being observed half the time from the point of view of Otto (2007: 133).

Here, Medem's lead female characters, Ana and Linda, have a more complicated relationship with the male gaze. In spite of the fact that we frequently adopt her point of view, Ana is initially presented as an object of desire for the viewer, and Anglo's (medical) male gaze is critical to her character development. The presence of Linda's (biased) camera makes an unequivocal link between her and Medem, highlighting the director's power to shape narratives according to their own beliefs and prejudices.

With reference to Ángel in *Tierra,* Stone writes,

> Medem is still the baby in the mirror, who, believing himself in control of the imagery in a film that was a reflection of his own concerns and obsessions, succumbed to the narcissism of seeing his internal identity represented by an actor with the charisma and virility of Gómez (2007: 47).

This harsh but fair criticism could equally be applied to *Ana*. Here, Medem appropriates the body and perspective of a feminist artist the better to cement his point of view as 'other' to a cultural narrative dominated by a violating masculine gaze, but there remains an uncomfortable tension between Linda's feminist proclamations and the framing of women onscreen. Medem's (retrogressive) view of woman as goddess inhibits

[46] In Medem's next project, *Habitación en Roma*, the onscreen male perspective is completely and notably absent.

the representation of his protagonist, confining her to the position of sexualised Venus. Here, the main dark-haired onscreen Medem-alike (as discussed, usually interpreted by Novo or Gómez) is Said, played by Nicolas Cazalé; the actor bears a striking resemblance to Medem. Again, like the other alter egos in Medem's auteurist catalogue, Said is presented as cowardly and limited.

In the film's final sequence we are offered an alternative in Halcón's bodyguard (Giacomo Gonnella), who appears onscreen as a potent, inverse masculine presence, a knowing and exaggerated ego-ideal: Gonnella's long black hair and dark good looks recall Novo and Gómez in earlier roles, but here, the actor's muscular, hyper-masculine presence mocks the beta masculinity represented by Said and the men in Medem's previous works. Significantly, in spite of his obvious strength, Gonnella's character is frustratingly impotent in the violent scene that follows, unable to defy his master and therefore bound to participate (however passively) in Ana's beating.

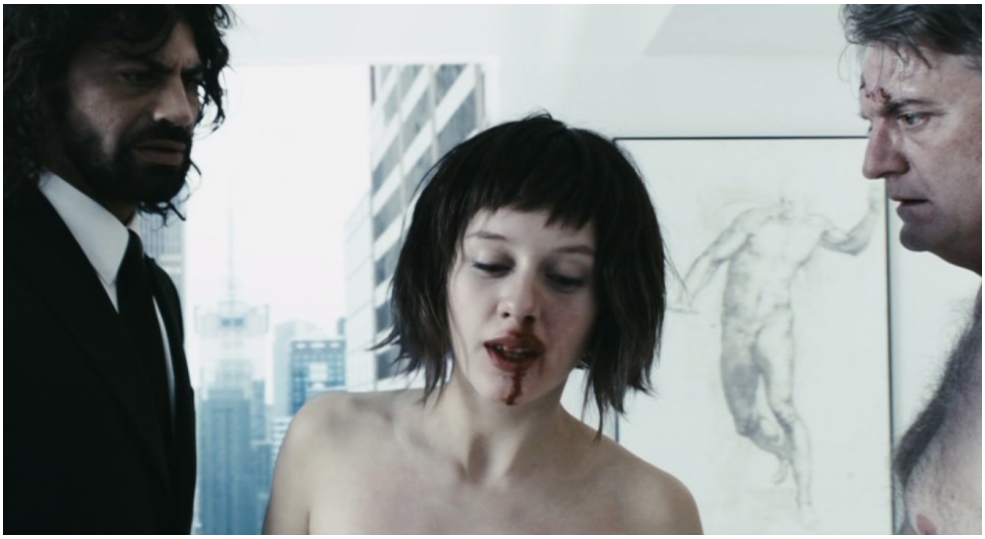

Figure 3: Ana, the feminine chaos that Halcón and his bodyguard are trying to contain.

The film periodically defers to the 'herstory' written by Linda's camera, perhaps in an attempt to break the 'cadena de atrocidades, crueldades e injusticias' (Medem 2007a: 39) that Ana's father Klaus identifies as the

history of man. Here, the 'voice' that fills Ana the hysterical amnesiac's 'zona húmeda' and 'cavernosa' (the vacancy left by her wandering womb) is coded onscreen as female through Linda's 'feminist' lens. What makes Linda's camera so interesting in this context is the way that it highlights the limitations of the grieving male gaze: in light of this, we may interpret Gonnella's bodyguard as a deliberate mockery of Medem's own powerlessness as a grieving brother.[47] Taking this further, we might also read it as an example of the way in which a (male) filmmaker is never able to fully escape the paradigm written by dominant patriarchal discourse. As Mulvey famously argues, cinema 'poses questions of the ways the unconscious (formed by the dominant order) structures ways of seeing and pleasure in looking' (1999: 834), meaning that an *auteur* director like Medem is always the one truly controlling the gaze, and for that reason it will remain contaminated with the politics of violence and domination that have been the paradigm for so long.

Although physically nothing like Medem, Anglo embodies most definitively Mulvey's heterosexual masculine 'screen surrogate' (1999: 838), where the narrative power of a male protagonist coincides with the erotic look: soon after meeting (and hypnotising) her, Anglo declares his love for Ana. Freud himself draws parallels between hypnosis and falling in love, observing that hypnosis 'is distinguished from being in love by the absence of directly sexual trends' (2001: 115). He notices the 'same humble subjection, the same compliance […] towards the hypnotist just as towards the loved object' but, crucially, 'with sexual satisfaction excluded' (Freud 2001: 115). In Anglo, Medem problematises this separation, presenting the viewer with an example of a hypnotic relationship that represents the difficult intersection between the forces of desire, love, and medical curiosity. Like Charcot and his hysterics at the Salpêtrière, Anglo becomes the interlocutor of Ana's unconscious, an

[47] Sànchez writes that while both deal with resistance to male domination, 'neither *Vacas* nor *La ardilla roja* is an overtly feminist film' (1997: 148). Although Medem's films always explore gender and its presentation, Linda is the most overtly feminist character in his cinematic world.

invited voyeur (if that is not too much of a paradox) and interpreter whose intentions are presented as both loving and lustful, whose gaze is both medical and sexual. Mulvey writes,

> Woman then stands in patriarchal culture as signifier for the male other, bound by a symbolic order in which man can live out his phantasies and obsessions through linguistic command by imposing them on the silent image of woman still tied to her place as bearer of meaning, not maker of meaning (1999: 834).

Diegetically, Linda and her camera highlight the complexity of the gaze, but for all that this film tries to address the problem Mulvey outlines, Ana remains a character consistently framed in relation to men: whether as Klaus' daughter, Said's lover, Anglo's patient/object of desire, Ismael's stowaway, or Halcón's waitress/victim/vanquisher. After falling for Said, in a letter to her father, Ana declares 'un hombre me ha cogido, por fin' (Medem 2007a: 8): this statement draws attention to woman's seemingly unavoidable 'thing-ness' as an object that can be 'taken' and possessed.[48] By giving Anglo and Linda these powers of interpretation, perhaps Medem is inviting not only women but also foreign, English speaking audiences to assume these positions and construct their own narratives in relation to his work.

Discussing the female body as representation, Nead observes that when woman plays out 'the roles of both viewed object and viewing subject' she cannot help but form and judge 'her image against cultural ideals' and exercise 'a fearsome self-regulation' (1992: 10). But what happens when we view Medem's representation of a woman (Linda) 'regulating' another's hysteria (Ana)? Ana Medem frequently depicted women's bodies in her work, so at one level Linda is simply an homage to

[48] Similarly, to a certain extent the actress must relinquish control over her body onscreen and hand it over to the filmmakers as a commodity that eventually gets projected into the world as an object of desire that both screens (conceals) and screens (shows) her body: 'in their traditional exhibitionist role women are simultaneously looked at and displayed' (Mulvey 1999: 837). See Didi-Huberman (2003: 234) for points about rape, hypnosis and consent.

the real Ana, but on another, she functions as the director's alter-ego.[49] Having said that, the recurring trope of the sexualized everywoman in Medem's cinema makes the 'object' of Linda's gaze a woman who embodies a standard of beauty long associated with heterosexual fantasies of dominance, submission, and availability. Of course, filmmaking requires recording a scene (or a body) from several angles at once, before splicing it together (and often post-synching sound) in the editing process to create the ultimate object of desire framed by the cinema (or, these days, laptop) screen. For viewers, is difficult to avoid slipping into the voyeur/desire/object dynamic that so often prevents deeper engagement with the text. Linda's lens purports to introduce a platonic female gaze that 'sees' through to the truth of the matter: Ana's hysterical arch, for example. And yet, as we shall see in this section, the overarching, controlling gaze of Medem's personal vision remains masculine and heteronormative, reproducing the patriarchal symbolic that the hysterical arch simultaneously exposes.

Combined with the poignant role of the sibling relationship in this film, the personal nature of Medem's work (strongly influenced by his reading of psychoanalysis and Freud) presents problems with the representation of sex onscreen. Etxebeste Gómez summarises that in Medem's work, 'sex appears on camera without taboo or secrecy – since *Vacas* it has been earthy, telluric, attached to the human's most animal instincts' (2010: 69). While Medem's cinematic world has always been unapologetically sexual – and indeed the lovers in *Vacas* (Peru and Cristina) were half-siblings – the link with Medem's sister could be regarded as troubling**.** Huddleston finds it 'particularly unsettling' (2007) that Said is Medem's principal onscreen double, given the explicit sex scene between this character and Ana, who is not only his fictional 'reincarnated' mother, but the on-screen representation of Medem's

[49] There are parallels between this and the 'regulation' of the hysterical female body in *La piel que habito*, where Banderas' neurotic and controlling voyeur constantly spies on a woman modelled on Bourgeois' representations of self/the feminine.

sister: for a director who uses his work to explore his own life and on-screen sexuality, things are liable to become complicated.[50]

With its graphic sex sequences, *Lucía y el sexo* marked Medem out as a director unafraid to take risks with the cinematic representation of sex. As he explains, 'quería llegar todo lo lejos que pudiera en la representación del sexo en la pantalla, explorar los límites de la pornografía' (Angulo and Rebordinos 2004: 45-6).[51] The first cut had two penetration shots, filmed with real pornographic actors as body doubles, but later excised.[52] Here, the fact that it will become apparent that Ana is the (archaic) 'mother' and Said, her lover, the (archaic) 'son' demonstrates the free flow of psychoanalytically informed identities and roles that characterise this film and Medem's work in general.

The sexual terrain of *Ana* is tame by comparison to *Lucía*, and more interested in the intensity of Ana and Said's experience of *amour fou*, by allowing us the vicarious pleasure of experiencing the act from each lover's point of view. This haptic experience is crucial: in his analysis of *Lucía,* Stone defines Medem's camera as 'a restless body-snatcher' (2007: 163) that appropriates different subjectivities. This technique carries over into *Ana* and its exploration of identity, as the shifting perspectives of various characters onscreen refract Medem's 'eye'. It is when toying with subjectivity that Medem's cinema slips so

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[50] <http://www.notcoming.com/reviews/chaoticana> [Accessed 3/3/17].

[51] Wheeler observes that following the success of *Lucía y el sexo*, Paz Vega, who played the eponymous heroine, 'was arguably Spain's leading sex symbol' (2012: 465); '*Lucía y el sexo* (2001) (Julio Medem's most commercially successful film to date in Spain) was marketed, particularly abroad, on its sexually explicit content' (Fouz-Hernández and Martinez-Expósito 2007: 192).

[52] 'Sin embargo, una vez visto el material montado, Medem decidió suprimirlos porque consideraba que pertenecían a un código distinto al que tenía la película y que no funcionaban, que no permitían que esta fluyera en las coordenadas precisas' (Angulo and Rebordinos 2004: 46); 'Issues of authenticity problematize what could have been otherwise 'natural' close-up shots of the penis: the first of the two, supposed to be Lorenzo's penis fondled by Lucía is in fact not Ulloa's but David Bulnes's (who plays the minor role of a porn actor working with Belén's mother, appearing in various scenes that are shown on a television screen). The second close-up of a penis, supposed to be Carlos's (Daniel Freire) could be, as Smith points out (2005b: 243), a prosthesis' (Fouz-Hernández and Martinez-Expósito 2007: 192).

effectively into the haptic realm. His camera presses up against skin, evoking a 'tactility of vision that opens up the screen to an embodied engagement' (Loxham 2014: 116) that, Loxham continues, encourages a 'nuanced treatment of the female body' (2014: 116). It is these nuances that I want to examine in detail in this chapter. Inviting the audience *into* the bed and granting us the experience from both points of view helps prevent the film from becoming entirely reactionary in its gender politics. This bisexual experience moves the viewer from a distanced contemplation of the female nude closer to an embodied interaction with the naked, sexual female and male bodies. Seen from Ana's point of view, Said becomes the onscreen object of desire, momentarily disrupting the dominant heterosexual gaze. In stark contrast to her later framing as passive object of the (lustful and medical) gaze while under hypnosis, here Ana's body is presented as active and powerful subject: this scene attempts to 'separate power from the gaze' (Loxham 2014: 119) by inviting the viewer to collapse the fourth wall of the screen, step over the threshold, and get into bed.

Each film discussed in this thesis presents women as objects that are simultaneously lost and desired, but here the dynamic shifts into a different gear. Buñuel and Almodóvar use the anguish of their masculine protagonists to articulate the force of desire and longing onscreen (in both cases framing the fight between men and women in terms of an eternal cycle of hunting and capturing). *Ana,* however, starts where *La piel* ends by moving to the 'lost' object's point of view. Through Mathieu, Buñuel demonstrates the deterioration brought about by desire for an impossible object. In *La piel*, Ledgard's disturbing, violent crime is catalysed by grief over the two catastrophic losses of his wife and daughter. Both films portray a Bataillian vision of 'the anguish of desire', demonstrated by desiring subjects (Mathieu and Ledgard) who take extreme action in an attempt to overcome their longing that remains 'still inaccessible, still an impotent, quivering yearning' (Bataille 2006: 18). This impotence is underlined in each case by their ultimate failure to consummate their

relationship with the object in question (Conchita and Vera respectively). By contrast, Medem's film seeks to align the spectator with Ana rather than the men who desire her (Anglo, Said, Ismael, or Halcón), allowing the core lost object eventually to emerge as an autonomous self/identity. In addition, and also paradoxically, *Ana* further expands this conceit to make mystical connections between all lost and idealised objects under the umbrella term, 'woman'. From a Freudian perspective, the lost object is always the mother.[53] Thus, regardless of gender, the initial object of desire (that we grieve for) is part of the fragmented female and maternal body: the lost breast. The understanding follows, then, that to an extent we must all project this loss onto 'women'.[54]

The unavoidable voyeurism inherent in Medem's directorial gaze undermines his apparent aim to align the viewer primarily with Ana. For example, as established, in the early nightclub scene, narcotics draw Ana into an ecstatic liminal state where the boundary between her conscious and unconscious mind begins to dissolve and the repression mechanism loosens its grip, allowing the repressed to make a momentary hallucinatory return. Amid the chaotic lights and beats Ana is besieged by a series of at this point incongruous images – a horse, an admiral, a hard to decipher phallic object (the horse's penis?) – revealing a heterogeneous, repressed unconscious full of Freudian symbols. Later in the narrative, these symbols take on more significance as we learn about Ana's past lives (and their violent endings). They will later be decoded onscreen for us by Anglo's hypnotic sessions and Linda's digital camera. Much of this film is about *jouissance*, but its representation is complicated by Medem's attempt to distance his portrayal of Ana from the pitfalls of the male gaze, something that he ultimately fails to do.

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[53] Catherine Marchak explains Kristeva's emphasis on the connection between 'the archaic mother and the creation of the abject through paternal law. […] This means that for those who become entranced by the abject, there is a ceaseless search for "the desirable, terrifying, nourishing and murderous, fascinating and abject inside of the maternal body"' (1990: 360).

[54] 'For Klein, the breast is a "part object" that represents the mother: the part for the whole. Sculpted part objects (particularly the breast and the penis/clitoris), as in *Janus Fleuri*, feature widely in Bourgeois's work' (Mitchell 2014: 12).

Figure 4: Ana dancing in Ibiza.

When Ana first has sex with Said, the camera traces the arched bend of her body back in another expression of ecstasy, this time a more straightforward depiction of *jouissance.* In this discussion of hysteria, however, it takes on further significance, because (as we know) nineteenth century doctors saw sex as an answer to the hysteric's symptoms, along with various massages, and drugs (Pearce 2014: 2).[55] In this scene, Ana and Said have sex at cross purposes. Interpreted retrospectively, this scene illustrates Lacan's well-known aphorism, *il n'y a pas de rapport sexuel* (1991: 134).[56] According to Lacanian thought, sex exists in the Real and remains impossible to represent, and the *jouissance* that comes from sex is only possible in each singular living body in the couple; that is to say, it remains separate from the other. This scene can be unpacked to demonstrate how the two *jouissances* being experienced onscreen are in fact separate and independent of one

[55] According to Greco-Roman literature, 'hysteria became apparent when the female reproductive system was inactive or ungratified. […] Generally, hysteria was supposedly caused by migration of the uterus to other body sites if it became dried up from lack of fluids' (Pearce 2014: 2).

[56] Badmington explains, 'neither half of the loving couple can satisfy the other, for neither has what the other really wants. Each is bound to desire, bound to lack, bound to the Other' (2010: 10).

another: later in the narrative it is revealed that, for Said, Ana is a reincarnation of his (literally and figuratively) lost mother, so (although unbeknown to him at this point in the narrative) sex here is an Oedipal act that stages an interaction with the lost maternal body, which Medem draws our attention to with the shot of Said sucking Ana's nipple. For Ana, sex is presented as simultaneously an expression of and an escape from her hysteria, as her arched body at once mimics the shape of the hysterical *arc-en-cercle* and the orgasmic spasm that would signify a release from hysterical symptoms. The impossibility of shared *jouissance* recalls the lonely figure of Bourgeois' *Arch of Hysteria,* isolated and suspended mid hysterical/orgasmic spasm.

These expressions of *jouissance* might also be interpreted as visual clues indicative of the strength of Ana's character. As Gallop proposes:

> The difference between *jouissance* and pleasure is generally understood to be one of degree: *jouissance* is stronger and so the person who experiences it is stronger, braver, less repressed, less scared. The timid, defensive egos, cautious in their bourgeois comfort, prefer *plaisir* and shun *jouissance*, but we brave, feminist, revolutionary, *avant-garde*... (1984: 114).

Ana's association with the orgasmic/hysterical arch can therefore be read as an expression of *jouissance* that functions as a statement of the strength and bravery that is cemented by her triumph over the film's violent final encounter with Mister Halcón.

Patricia MacCormack's theory of cinesexuality argues that the spectator desires to experience a 'conjugal territory' (2008: 6) with a film. The multifaceted camerawork in this sex scene appears to illustrate her point, creating a moment where the film (image) almost does become a lover. Consequently, we might interpret this sex scene as an illustration of the 'conjugal territory' (2008: 6) that she argues the spectator desires to experience with a film; Medem's multifaceted camerawork encourages this union. Arguing that 'all concepts are desire' and citing Foucault's

claim that 'desire [is] the lawless law of the world [Foucault 1997a, 17]' (2008: 17), MacCormack continues:

> Lawless suggests not illicit desire, but pure potentiality which also makes all other things possible. If desire is always present in events in some form, all events encourage lawlessness in all concepts (2008: 17).

This 'lawlessness' brings us back to Huddleston's discomfort: Medem is interested in embracing unconscious chaos, rather than realism: namely here, the problematic simultaneity of the maternal and sexual woman. Like his surrealist forebears, Medem is interested in pushing the boundaries of filmmaking, interrogating the way we interact with storytelling when it is grounded in an intimately physical experience, and his inexhaustible scrutiny of the meaning of narrative truth as demonstrated in *La ardilla roja*, *Tierra* and *Lucía* in particular. Identity is fragile, and Medem's films encourage us to adopt a flexible approach to the boundaries between self and other that mitigates overly literal interpretations of the symbolic incest in *Ana*. Santaloalla writes:

> In [Medem's] fictional world little is stable or whole: the physical and the psychological criss-cross, reality and fantasy blend, nature and artifice imitate each other. The films are open-ended processes in which one-dimensional or essentialist notions of identity and subjectivity are ruthlessly exposed (1999: 312).

Ana is certainly open-ended in its approach to identity and subjectivity, and, having explored the open-ended connotations of incest, we need to re-examine the essentialism that accompanies this representation of sexualised femininity defined by chaos.

The gender-violence that fuels *Ana*'s narrative frames the intense representation of sex and sexuality in a potentially fraught context. As in *Cet obscur objet*, the concurrence of sex and violence recalls Bataille's assertion that 'in essence, the domain of eroticism is the domain of violence, of violation' (2006: 16), casting woman as the eternal victim of

sex that is a violent and violating act. Discussing Spanish cinema, Wheeler cautions against this conflation, noting that 'sexual violation has […] also been cynically employed as a source of voyeurism and titillation to entice audiences' (2012: 487). Possible discomfort arising from the (arguably Bataillian) conflation of sex and violence in Medem's work is exacerbated because it exists 'in the context of a national cinema that has often sought to trivialize sexual violence' (Wheeler 2012: 465). While the sex scenes between Ana and Said may strive for an egalitarian view of a natural act that in itself ought not to be taboo, their inclusion alongside representations of the female body in violent trauma raises familiar questions about exploitation and the relationship of the spectator to images of violence onscreen.[57] Stone notes that 'sex in Spanish cinema is usually either linked with Catholic repression and male violence or frivolously deployed as a spectacle for the male gaze' (2007: 157), and both are relevant here. Furthermore, sex and violence suffer a similar crisis of representation when translated onscreen, for no verbal or visual description can equate to the physical experience – hence why, for Lacan, they constitute the Real.

Gaylyn Studlar sees masochism as a way of negotiating this crisis of representation: through disavowal and deferral of the act that resists representation – sex and/or violence – the spectator finds the pleasure brought through cathartic release suspended. According to the literature of Sacher-Masoch, 'the reader takes his or her literary pleasure from the infinite postponement of climax' (Zuromskis 2007: 12), and something similar happens in *Ana* regarding violence against the female body. The film's scatological prologue functions as an omen, setting up, like the proverbial narrative carrot and stick, an expectation of the brutal killing of a (symbolically) benign female by a violent male. As the narrative unfolds, euphemistic references to this violent act are repeated, alluded to through Ana's paintings, Linda's assertions that men are rapists, and acts of

[57] Stone explains that 'the selling of Spanish cinema on the international market was largely predicated upon the presence of sex' (2007: 68).

violence seen from Ana's point of view from 'within' one of her hypnotically induced hallucinations, or enacted by Ana's body alone, as victim of an invisible aggressor. The partial perspective on these acts encourages the viewer to configure the rest of the action in their imagination, much like soft-core pornography of the kind that 'may encourage the viewer to imagine aspects of the sexual encounter that cannot be shown' (Zuromskis, 2007: 4), stimulating desire by remaining open-ended. Here, these perspectives may tantalise, with a kind of soft-core violence, building towards a violent climax and exacerbating the crescendo of the film's hyper-violent final scene and its perverse female-generated, defecatory 'ejaculation'.

This defiant and irreverent final image conveys a message infinitely more powerful than any carried by Medem's script. It is partly due to the character's two-dimensional lack of depth, mentioned above with reference to Ana Medem's art-work, that this onscreen Ana remains a largely visual object, her performance detached from the script. Smith describes the dialogue as 'banal' (2007: 33), a criticism echoed more stridently by Huddleston, who writes, 'the script takes scattered, ill-considered and shallow potshots at easy political and sociological targets' (2007).[58] Carlos Heredero also finds that Medem's visual panache is let down by the weakness of his script (1999: 260-261). The script is, indeed, frustratingly simplistic and, as such, at odds with the relative complexity of the visual imagery. The dialogue engages in an unsophisticated way with political oppression (patriarchy and Western cultural dominance), offering little commentary and putting core principles crudely (women are whores, men are rapists) in the mouth of Ana herself:

> LINDA: Ellos se creen los putos amos, pero en el sexo les tenemos cogidos por aquí, a los muy capullos.
> ANA: Nosotras putas… y ellos violadores.
> LINDA: De toda la vida (Medem 2007a: 47).

[58] <http://www.notcoming.com/reviews/chaoticana> [Accessed 3/3/17].

If Medem's stated objective was to write an 'ode', a form of lyrical poetry that is 'written in varied or irregular meter' (Oxford English Dictionary: online resource),[59] and if his film narratives are generally considered to be poetic rather than prosaic (Angulo and Rebordinos 2004: 24), this may be reflected in dialogue that serves not to advance the plot, but to describes a feeling or thought instead (Angulo and Rebordinos 2004: 25). The danger here is that *Ana* may read more like a garbled manifesto than a sustained piece of narrative cinema, and the distinction between two modes of storytelling made by Angulo and Rebordinos emphasises the lack of traditional plotting at its heart. They describe Medem's cinema as 'cine rabiosamente subjetivo, nacido de sus más íntimos sueños, deseos y fantasías […], cine que se mueve entre la fantasía y la realidad y que, más que certezas, plantea interrogantes' (Angulo and Rebordinos 2004: 19), but some have argued that, in this case, the result is simply bad film-making. We shall return to dialogue later, but before moving on, I want to return to Medem's personal and phenomenological vision. Critics have noted this emphasis on the visual, Stone observes 'Medem's filmic rather than literary relationship with his characters' (2007: 171), and Etxebeste Gómez notes 'el mundo de Medem es, por lo tanto, más visual y emocional que narrativo' (2010: 48). For Santaolalla, 'Medem's films prioritise the *look* as the instrument guaranteeing access to those multiple layers of reality' (1998: 334). What this brief excerpt from the dialogue confirms is that Medem is better at showing than telling. His cinema is grounded in a phenomenological experience of the world that is related to the physical and the instinctive as opposed to the cerebral and analytical, and that is therefore related in a complex way to the representation of the female gender on screen.

As established, the simplistic script is at odds with the complexity of Medem's visual language: 'the visual rhetoric is much more engrossing' (Smith 2007: 33). His attempt to move beyond the restrictions of a patriarchal, language-bound symbolic order and interest in the

[59] <http://www.oxforddictionaries.com/definition/english/ode> [Accessed 3/3/17].

phenomenological experience of the world means recourse to visual imagery is inevitable. The script's weakness, however, showcases what is of primary interest here: that is, the way the visual imagery reflects on the position of women within the symbolic; the position of women as the medium through which men may project emotions associated with the feminine; and the position of women as a synonym for Art. Medem's ability to 'suggest meaning in elaborate visual conceits' (Stone 2007: 151), is where his talent lies. This reliance on the rich visual over the thin dialogue relates to the hysteric, who communicates through physical expression, a bodily language that speaks through gestures rather than words to circumvent the restrictions of a language that only reinforces the divisions that reproduce the 'hysterical' symptom.

Medem's trademark visual prologue is typical of this approach.[60] Abstract and enigmatic, it illustrates the connection with the poetic, and a form of language that plays with and occasionally breaks the rules imposed by patriarchal linguistic narrative. This is the connection between Medem and the surrealists, who were also interested in the free play of ideas and associations sparked by an image (Lautréamont's chance meeting of an umbrella and a sewing machine).[61] Verbal language is more intimately connected to the Lacanian symbolic, which is by its nature restrictive. Despite its failings, this film is interesting for the way it tackles hysterical female bodies and their visual representation onscreen. Linda's position is evocative of that of the cinema spectator, whose seat is fixed to the ground, observing the mutability of the various objects of desire represented on screen. If Linda is, additionally, an alter-ego of Medem, he too may be tethered to the earth while the object of his desire – this time a desire fuelled by grief rather than sex – flies off into her

[60] 'Yo siempre intento en los primeros minutos de cada pelicula mostrar al espectador por dónde tiene que asomarse a la historia. Le digo: *"Mira por aquí, por favor".* Voy mostrando, voy plasmando un estado, un tono, una atmósfera narrative para decirle que la película tiene una Mirada, para indicarle dónde se tiene que situar' – Julio Medem (Angulo and Rebordinos 2004: 177); see also J. Evans (2007: 108).

[61] 'As an avowed Surrealist, Medem thrives on coincidences as exceptions that confirm the rule of a truly unruly universe' (Stone 2007: 163).

afterlife as ashes scattered on the wind, or the dove from the opening sequence.

Figure 5: The unsuspecting dove, shortly before it becomes the falcon's prey

Ana's visual narrative explores the relationship between grief and desire for the lost object, shedding light on, and raising fascinating questions about how primitively the unconscious mind conveys grief and desire for the lost object to the conscious mind: this film, steeped in personal crisis, presents the lawlessness of desire and grief as equally motivating forces in the representation of the 'hysterical', chaotic Ana that we shall now examine in more depth.

Magical realism and the visual poetry of grief

Joan Didion's *The Year of Magical Thinking* explores the experience of derangement inherent in grieving, with particular emphasis, as she puts it, on 'how really tenuous our sanity is'.[62] The book is structured so that it replicates a common quirk of the grieving process, 'the way in which you obsessively go over the same scenes again and again and again trying to make them end differently'.[63] The narrative of *Ana* could be said to enact the same process as we watch the eponymous heroine re-enact her own death until she succeeds in breaking the cycle. Although Medem's sister's death was accidental, it is envisaged as countless violent murders that may be read in the context of Kristeva's understanding that all narrative is 'the recounting of suffering: fear, disgust, and abjection crying out, they quiet down, concatenated into a story' (1982: 145). Given the close personal connection Medem has to this narrative, it is, I would argue, possible to read as his own projected grief transposed via Ana's traumatic hysterical narrative.

Repetition and symmetry are common motifs in Medem's work suggesting recurring events in some kind of collective unconscious: the cyclical violence in *Vacas,* the palindromic Arctic Circle protagonists, Otto and Ana, Ángel and his *doppelgänger* in *Tierra* and the structure of *Ana* move forward in loops and repetitions that function like recurring elements in a collective unconscious that exists across his body of work. In addition, Stone links foregrounding the animal gaze to 'magical realism [that] brokers no conflict between a rational view of reality and deadpan acceptance of the supernatural' (1997: 41). In *Ana*'s allegorical prologue, the cinematography places us alongside the flying dove, and a medium close up of its eye hints at the best perspective to assume when watching the film [Fig. 5]. It also recalls shots in *Vacas* that similarly emphasised the 'unknowability' of the female/animal element by focussing attention on

[62] <http://nymag.com/nymetro/arts/books/14633/> [Accessed 3/3/17].
[63] <http://nymag.com/nymetro/arts/books/14633/> [Accessed 3/3/17].

the opaque black spheres of the cows' eyes.[64] Merging the real and the surreal in this way links the magical real with feelings of grief, and may explain why a retreat into a fairy tale world of monsters and goddesses proposes a tonic for emotional pain. Didion wrote her book in one year, propelled by a need to process her grief to the point where she appreciated that its rawness was 'the texture it ought to have'.[65] My suggestion here is that the repetitions in *Ana,* are similarly propelled by the distorting force of grief, and, at the same time, that these repetitions push Medem's trademark testing of boundaries to the limit.

While, in this opening sequence, the camera's focus cuts between the falcon and the dove, it only grants us an actual point of view shot from the perspective of the dove's excremental missile, suggesting that while a bird's eye view may be preferable, it is also impossible. The historical violent domination of women by men is impossible to see from a position of clarity because the paradigm that casts man as hunter and woman as prey is still dominant and as such continues to unconsciously shape our perspective. One of the hunters explains that the falcon's greatest asset is its eyesight (again drawing our attention to the symbolic importance of sight in Medem's work), and the focus cuts to an aerial shot of the assembled men (in traditional hunting clothes) as a rapidly descending point of view zoom downwards is accompanied by a 'whooshing' swell of the soundtrack. The perspective then cuts abruptly back to a medium shot of the falcon as a glob of shit lands squarely on its 'greatest asset'. The hunters call the dove a 'fucking bird' (translated from the Spanish), underlining that this fight is between male hunters and the 'fucking birds' whose provocative behaviour merits punishment by death. Importantly, when this icon of peace momentarily disables an icon of war, the dove's action is not presented as a deliberate act of aggression but as a quirk of

[64] In *Vacas*, the camera actually uses the cow's eye to cross the threshold, actually 'penetrating' it and emerging elsewhere. Here, the narrative develops between the dove's gaze and Ana's final defecation, but the entrance into her (as bird)'s perspective is not demonstrated so literally by the cinematography.
[65] <http://nymag.com/nymetro/arts/books/14633/> [Accessed 3/3/17].

fate, or even, more symbolically and humorously, an inevitable side-effect of unregulated feminine abjection. So while Medem cannot really provide us with the female point of view, he can draw our attention to how much of what we think we see is from a 'shit' perspective, and his films try to work on both the humour and significance of pointing this out to us.[66] In a narrative that is all about the power of 'waking up', this prologue seems to highlight the difference between sight and insight, subtly moving beyond the clichéd perspectives of the 'dove' and the 'falcon' to make a more complex point about the ways in which our vision is compromised.

Ana's symbolic association with the dove establishes her mystical connection with birds, subject to capricious air currents that may cause her/them significant harm. Etxebeste Gómez (2010) and J. Evans (2007a: 98) note the importance of wind in Medem's cinema, with the former claiming it functions almost as a protagonist in itself (2010: 78, 151). In conversation about *La ardilla*, Medem speaks of its symbolic importance: 'Mis historias surgen siempre de un paisaje muy visible y el tiempo irrumpe a veces sin control, como un viento caliente que me puede quemar' (Angulo and Rebordinos 2004: 136). In this film, Linda describes herself as 'de tierra, supersólida' (Medem 2007a: 50), while Ana is frequently associated with amorphous wind and water, underlining the different functions of these two representations of femininity. As discussed, Linda and her camera remain fixed: she does not go with Anglo or Ana to America, and her only way of 'travelling' is via filming Ana's hypnotic episodes. Linda is denied much of the freedom of movement Medem's camera grants his audience. As if also floating on currents of air between different realities, Medem's camera moves with a swooping dynamism that contrasts sharply, for example, with Buñuel's static visual sobriety. Coupled with the score's parallel dips and crescendos, the effect is one of constant disorienting movement and

[66] As opposed to Buñuel's infamous assault on the (female) eye, which comparatively reads as a much more aggressively violent and less constructive act.

dizzying shifts in perspective. Medem is unequivocal about the role of soundtrack:

> La música de Jocelyn Pook en *Caótica Ana* es una forma de energía femenina, muy ancestral, que poco a poco va llenando los fondos de Ana, hasta colmarlos y rebosarlos cuando llega el momento del sacrificio. Su sonoridad vocal viene de muy dentro y acaba saliendo por la boca de Ana. […] Su música es su voz interior y abismal de mujer (Medem in Etxebeste Gómez 2010: 80-81).

Here, Medem (perhaps unconsciously) echoes the traditional clichés that consign woman to the role of magical empty vessel in need of filling, in this case by an ancestral voice that is perceived as both inherently feminine and sacrificial. A voiceless woman is presented as an abstraction, an echo chamber: this Ana is a draughty structure, a repository for all things female presented, as previously noted, as more visual than verbal; an empty shell to be filled not with words but music, carried on the wind. Unstable and occasionally wild, a strong wind brings chaos and, associated with the feminine, its current serves to emphasise the transitional and disruptive power of woman in Medem's cinematic imaginary. This magically realist prologue demonstrates a masculine drive for supremacy over a (feminised) natural world, the gang of male hunters recalling the brutal ending of Carlos Saura's *Ana y los lobos* (1973), which sees a different Ana (Geraldine Chaplin) hounded to death by a different group of men. Unlike Saura's Ana, Medem's 'fucking bird' will not be dominated and, harnessing the chaos she represents to the symbolic order, she remains abject, but untethered to the rules of patriarchal law.

If, as I am suggesting here, this may be read as a displaced narrative – the displacement of male grief-induced hysteria onto an endlessly fragmented female Ana/anima – it poses the question: what harm do we do to the image of the other when we grieve their loss? If grief is, like desire, a distorting force, will it always fetishise and fragment

its object? And how close is the relationship of this film text to Bataille's statement that 'man goes constantly in fear of himself. His erotic urges terrify him' (2006: 7)? Might it suggest that, like the object of desire, the lost object is simultaneously desired and feared? The lost object incites grief and a desire for repossession, so that grief is folded paradoxically and inextricably into the experience of desire. Returning to our central focus on the representation of the female body, in this text, as a woman bent into a bowed hysterical arch from which the male director may launch the arrow of his grief, hunting imagery is reinstated; the drawn bow an eloquent symbol for the tension of unconsummated desire, its shape is a mirror image of the bent-backed hysterical arch. Medem directly references this shape in the *mise-en-scène* via the photograph of Ana's contorted body and the later screening of Linda's footage of Ana mid-hysterical spasm, in both cases underlining the importance of performance to any hysterical expression. The arrow is strung, the bow is pulled back, and there is *jouissance* in this anticipatory state of a desire that demands fulfilment. This also helps to clarify that this homage to a sister is less uncomfortably close to incestuous desire and more explicitly an articulation of the place where grief and desire overlap: both states exist in a slipstream that deviates from the status quo. For Bataille, eroticism (which relates to desire) works 'to destroy the self-contained character of the participators as they are in their normal lives' (2006: 17), acting as a magical force that leads to the heterogeneity of *jouissance.* This fragmentation of self is precisely what is projected onto Ana, a dissolution initiated, diegetically, by her desire for Said that leads (according to this fictional narrative progression) towards self-knowledge, understanding, and sovereignty. Bataille writes that 'possession of the beloved object does not imply death, but the idea of death is linked with the urge to possess' (2006: 20), illustrating one way in which the grieved for (feminine) object of desire might also incite fear in the (masculine) subject.

Via the magical realist elements of *Ana*, Medem explores a historical abuse of women that interviews with him suggest he feels keenly. He states that 'the power of woman has never been comparable to that of man historically or anthropologically' and emphasises the 'serious lack of equilibrium' between the sexes in a culture where 'woman is still not allowed to be fully active, to express herself in every aspect' (Medem 2008).[67] He continues:

> Woman has certain values regarding life, education and preservation that I find absolutely fascinating. So I placed myself at the extremes and I have confronted these extremes. Hence, in *Chaotic Ana*, this feminine instinct of creation punishes the 'man of war', but this is a lyrical punishment. This is not a physically violent punishment but its force is psychological (2008).[68]

And yet this use of the word 'woman', in conjunction with the film's magically realist narrative style, leans towards an objectification of gender difference, reinforced by a 'fascination' with the opposite sex that, today, seems reactionary. As Loxham and Stone have noted, this statement suggests a naïve approach to feminism, that is (coincidentally) visually echoed by the stylistic simplicity of his sister's paintings; the diegetic world of *Ana* might benefit greatly from Justine's advice that its eponymous protagonist seek 'más profundidad' (Medem 2007a: 57).[69]

In Medem's first three films, 'the most powerful characters are unfailingly women, the physical contexts are symbolically associated with the female world, and the animals which suggest metaphorical meanings are also feminine' (Santaolalla 1998: 335). Here, in spite of Medem's stated desire to fill this perceived feminine lack with a powerful female protagonist, his reverence towards 'woman' as mystical other profoundly

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[67] <https://www.closeupfilmcentre.com/vertigo_magazine/volume-3-issue-8-winter-2008/chaos-theories/> [Accessed 3/3/17].

[68] <https://www.closeupfilmcentre.com/vertigo_magazine/volume-3-issue-8-winter-2008/chaos-theories/> [Accessed 3/3/17].

[69] The inclusion of Ana's paintings follows a precedent set by Medem in *Vacas*, where Basque artist Vicente Ameztoy's paintings illustrate the film's essence; his surreal figures are part human, part vegetation, and represent notions of cyclical life and humanity's deep connection to nature.

undermines feminist principles; after all, goddesses and monsters remain mythical creatures. J. Evans' statement, with reference to *La ardilla roja,* that 'first love and institutionalised machismo both construct femininity as an enigma that has little to do with the living female' (2007a: 48) is still relevant to Medem's work fourteen years later. As are the 'ironic references to masculine flaws' (J. Evans 2007a: 49), as here too men are generally portrayed as weak willed and cowardly, especially when faced with potent female sexuality. Stone argues, with reference to *Lucía*, that the 'facile, arrogantly sexist imagining of these three females is entirely the point, because Lorenzo is the archetypal male coward in films written and directed by Medem' (2007: 161).[70] And, just as these earlier fictional women screen (in both senses of the word) male cowardice, Ana could be said to act as a screen for male grief, hysteria, and fear. Despite its laudable aim to highlight the brutal history of violence against women, I shall now argue that the attention to magical realism and the poetics of grief mean that, like *La pelota vasca,* this narrative accidentally reproduces the divisions it seeks to interrogate (J. Evans 2007a: 110).

Vivian Sobchack writes that:

> More often than men, women are the objects of gazes that locate and invite their bodies to live as merely material "things" immanently positioned in space rather than as conscious subjects with the capacity to transcend their immanence and posit space (2004: 32).

Our first view of Ana, naked and Venus-like on the beach in Ibiza, may illustrate Medem's telluric vision of liberated femininity, but it also fits squarely into an established heteronormative narrative of gendered subject-object relationship in the gaze. These are romanticised images of the female nude, and the tension between the frame itself and the image represented lies in the fact that this apparently free hippy earth goddess

[70] Heredero (1999) notes that in trying to be antimachista in *La ardilla*, Medem ends up being machista himself in imagining woman as man's creation, and a similar problem occurs here.

cannot escape 'her' construction in the patriarchal imaginary: here, she is presented in the magical real register as a fantasy idealisation of cave-dwelling, mythical woman-as-nymph.[71] This introduction to Ana does nothing to upset the patriarchal containment or the classical ideal of the female nude, and yet, it remains to be seen whether this is deliberate.

Bird goddess Osdad Ciaca, Ana's oldest incarnation and another magical real element in this film, provides a counterpoint to this representation of classical idealised femininity: interpreted via Creed's feared archaic mother, she embodies 'the parthenogenetic mother, the mother as primordial abyss, the point of origin and of end' (1993: 17).[72] This is played out onscreen after intertitle 2, when Ana and Anglo travel to the Hopi reservation in northern Arizona in order to return to the source. Creating a classically Medem-esque narrative palindrome, Ana returns to a cave, with all its attending womb symbolism: they meet Justine and an elderly Hopi woman in a settlement of cave dwellings that is also a museum of Native American history, and, seemingly triggered by the two thousand year old artefacts that surround her, Ana begins to swoon. They go deeper into the cave, entering a round room with a circular plinth at its centre. On top of the plinth is a human skull, blackened with age, with a giant wound splitting it down the middle.[73]

[71] Another recurring theme in Medem's cinema which, since *La ardilla roja*, has explored 'the construction of women's identity according to men's fantasies' (Sánchez 1997: 155).
[72] Anglo persuades Ana to allow him to perform 'la última hypnosis, y llegar al origen' (Medem 2007a: 128).
[73] This wound recalls the swinging masculine axe that opens *Vacas*, wielded by Medem's 'cowardly woodcutter' (J. Evans 2007a: 23), again emphasising the inevitability of this form of masculine violence.

Figure 6: Ana holding the skull with an axe wound in it.

Speaking in her indigenous language, the Hopi woman begins chanting 'Mother, Mother, Mother of Good Men!',[74] establishing a link between this lacerated skull and the female sex, suggesting that, like the womb, this wound is generative: it represents the original sin of masculine violence against the (divine) feminine, the origin of the existential grief that saturates this film's narrative. Ana reluctantly picks up the skull (a female Hamlet) and as it fills the screen in a point of view shot, a new female voice speaks in Hopi, off camera, urging Ana to speak her name: Osdad Ciaca [Fig. 6]. Anglo then hypnotises Ana, and the screen fades to black.

Coming round in the back of a car parked outside a saloon bar in the desert, Ana goes into the bar, where she finds Anglo and Justine. There follows a strange sequence in which they hook Anglo's video camera up to the bar's television and play a video from Linda in Madrid, addressing her 'queridísima amiga, amiga pájaro' (Medem 2007a: 140). Then, Ana herself appears on the small screen, under hypnosis. She

[74] Not in the script so taken from the subtitles.

does not want to watch, but Justine insists. The rest of the bar starts to pay attention as Ana (as Osdad Ciaca) speaks in Hopi, and an off-camera voice translates into English. There follows a sequence that flits between various times and perspectives, in which the action jumps between different scenarios: the 'real' Ana in the bar; the recording of Ana possessed by Osdad Ciaca displayed on the diegetic television screen; and flashback point of view shots from the perspective of Osdad Ciaca 'herself', of her murderous lover dressed as a bird and threatening her with an axe (an echo of the falcon's deadly beak). Ana again begins to swoon, and, as we shall see repeated in a later sequence on the slopes of K2, a series of jump cuts demonstrates how the various 'Ana's' all 'react' to the same stimulus – a slap across the face – uniting them across different temporal 'realities'. In this sequence, Ana's use of Hopi and the fact it is translated by another female voice recalls Irigaray's 'Mother Tongue', emphasising the need for a feminine language connected to woefully under-represented 'hystorical' (as opposed to 'historical') narratives.

If the original lost (and grieved for) object is the maternal breast, then this depiction of Ana-as-archaic-mother returns to the premise of an original, catastrophically wounding loss. The ancient cave setting of these scenes confirms a reading of the female body as the vessel for this alternative hystory, and creates a metaphorical parallel between Ana's cavernous internal depths and the empty spaces in history where feminine narratives have either been erased or not represented at all.[75] Just as the womb is a potentially generative space, Medem seems to urge us to fill these historical holes with missing, repressed feminine narratives. Osdad Ciaca is presented as the 'mother' of all Ana's identities, and in the absence of a 'real' mother in the protagonist's narrative, the bird goddess carries added significance, interpreted via

[75] Mitchell also links Bourgeois' work with Showalter's discussion of hysteria, describing the artist's preoccupation with the past as 'hysterical reminiscing, the flowery path of nostalgia – what Elaine Showalter called the hysteric's propensity for "hystories".' (Mitchell 2014: 11).

Creed's tropes of the amoral primeval mother, the witch, the possessed body, and the non-human animal (1993: 1).

This repressed feminine language is presented here as physical and hysterical, laden with a poetic grief. The hysterical *arc-en-cercle* as an expression of *jouissance* provides an important link between the disorder and poetic expression via the body, as Anita Monro explains:

> Discourse which exhibits *jouissance* exposes that heterogeneity, ambiguity and multiplicity. The exemplary mode of discourse which demonstrates the illusive "mastery" and ambivalent proprietary over the tools of language and identity that is *jouissance* is "poetic language". Poetic language is not simply poetry. It is a form of discourse that calls upon and reveals multiple meanings and significations in the one process by openly displaying the oscillation on which language and identity is based (2014: 113).

We might understand it as an hysterical expression of defiance, but when, in the film's final sequence (and, like the dove and the falcon, they too are 'in the sky'), Ana defecates on Mister Halcón, she declares it a poetic act.

Figure 7: Ana's abject poetic act.

Powerful and effective in its concise expression, it certainly pertains more to poetry than prose, slipping into a register that is closer to the magical

real in its execution – the absurdity of this abject act confirms that this final part of the film shifts once again into a different register, one closer to the magical realism referred to in the title to this section, departing from any last vestiges of realism so that Ana's unlikely (given the severity of the violence she suffers) ultimate survival does not shock or surprise.[76]

As mentioned in chapter two, in the 1920's, French surrealists adopted hysteria as the model for an avant-garde language of the unconscious and dreams opposed to science and the academies – again, as an alternative to dominant historical narratives. As Medem's hysterical heroine, in this sequence, Ana enjoys the freedom granted by surrendering to a different form of expression, a physically expressed poetic register that makes her point more effectively than any act of direct violence – the shock of the abject female body is violence enough in itself.

We shall now look at two particularly important sequences in this film and their relationship to the poetic and magically realist representation of Ana, following on from discussion of the mother-bird, and moving on to the defecation sequence that almost closes the film. Emerging from her violent encounter with Mister Halcón (which will be discussed in more detail shortly), Ana stumbles into the New York street bruised and blood-stained, shirt untucked, and walks through the New York crowd, smiling, as some turn to look, an ironic echo, perhaps, of the iconic credit sequence of *Sex and the City* (1998-2004): a dark Odile to Carrie Bradshaw's pink-tutued Odette. If we believe, with Foucault, that the body is 'a highly political object, a crucial site for the exercise and regulation of power' (Nead 1992: 10), then Ana has turned her abject body (literally) into a weapon. As mentioned earlier, Kristeva's abject is 'what disturbs identity, system, order', that which 'does not respect

[76] We are reminded once again of the surrealist muse/murderer Berton, whose crime the group appropriated her crime as a surrealist act, idealising it as 'the essence of feminine irrationality', feting it as a revolt against the patriarchal order. Berton called herself 'the Black Virgin of Anarchy', participating in this fascination with the idealised and objectified *femme fatale* (Sonn 2010: 77).

borders, positions, rules' (1982: 4). Disrupting the order of the natural world, Ana's magical real multiplicity casts her as both inherently abject and 'free'. The dove's metaphorical 'attack' on the falcon in the film's prologue is a random reprisal, governed by chance, whereas Ana's is an act of premeditated revenge, closing the circle and emphasizing the link between her and the dove, but also underlining the difference. In this final scene Medem's heroine turns her abjection onto her 'abjector' – by defecating on Mister Halcón, then surviving his beating, she disturbs the order of violence that this film suggests has been handed down to women for centuries, embodied by her past lives and violent deaths. This 'poetic' act 'draws attention to the fragility of the law' (Kristeva 1982: 4), rendering Halcón pathetic and humiliated, undone not by brute force but by poetic, scatalogical rebellion: the dove's playful revenge. Ana's defilement is a literal enacting of Kristeva's point that 'any secretion or discharge, anything that leaks out of the feminine or masculine body defiles' (1982: 102). The fact that Ana survives the beating is in itself a touch of the magical real, recalling the visual references to a superhero vernacular that we shall come to examine as a further instance of, or as part of this examination of the magical real.

Ana's impulse to ridicule masculine macho violence is not new in Medem's work: *Tierra* uses parodic violence to question alpha masculinity;[77] in *La ardilla roja* (1993), the duel between beta male Jota and alpha male Félix over Sofía concludes when the latter cuts his own cheek in an absurd gesture of fury, or, perhaps, a more traditionally feminine act of self-sabotage. In *Ana*, Mister Halcón is the personification of the 'hawk' mentality besieged by a defecating symbolic 'dove' that we might link to Jacques Derrida's concept of the 'spirit' of history: 'Erinnerung' means both memory and interiorization, and for Derrida:

> Spirit incorporates history by assimilating, by remembering its own past. This assimilation acts as a kind of sublimated eating—

[77] J. Evans writes that *Tierra* is 'filmed in a comically surreal way that makes the perpetrator of the violence look foolish rather than powerful' (2007a: 72).

> spirit eats everything that is external and foreign, and thereby transforms it into something internal, something that is its own. Everything shall be incorporated into the great digestive system (Birnbaum 2009).[78]

Ana describes this very act of assimilation: the heroine incorporates her (magical real) history of reincarnation via the hypnosis that enables her to remember it. This journey is then transformed into art products that are consumable on more than one level – firstly, diegetically, in Linda's *mise-en-abîme* filmic documentation of Ana's hypnotic process, which Ana ultimately uses to aid this assimilation of her own past. Secondly, extra-diegetically, in the shape of Medem's film itself. In the prologue, it is the dove's excrement that blinds patriarchy (embodied by the lethal falcon), and at the end of the film, Ana's excrement performs the same symbolic function. Kristeva writes:

> Excrement and its equivalents (decay, infection, disease, corpse, etc.) stand for the danger to identity that comes from without: the ego threatened by the non-ego, society threatened by its outside, life by death (1989: 71).

Here, Halcón represents patriarchal society, while Ana is the self-described 'sexual terrorist' (Medem 2007a: 165) that threatens its dominance. She uses her currency as object of desire to manipulate the American politician enough that she might threaten the abuse of power embodied by his office with her 'chaos' (which is linked to sex via hysteria), and then stages her abject act of poetic revenge.[79] This sequence operates in a different register from the rest of the film, and its sterile white light renders it hallucinatory and unreal. Considering that Medem encouraged a purely emotional response to this film, which he

[78] <http://www.e-flux.com/journal/an-interview-with-jacques-derrida-on-the-limits-of-digestion/> [Accessed 3/3/17].

[79] This feels particularly poignant in the era of Trump, particularly in the organised 'chaos' of the women's movement (among many others) that is protesting his outright misogyny with symbols such as the pink, knitted 'pussy hats' that create such a visually unified presence at many rallies and marches in the United States.

urged his audience to watch with 'brains switched off' (Huddleston 2007), such a change in tone should not be too challenging for viewers, particularly after a narrative full of magical realist touches. As if confirming the need to do so, *Ana*'s final scene slips back into the language of allegory, as the magical real brings the grief-stricken narrative repetitions to an end with this scatological distillation of the classic image of woman-as-nature versus man-as-brute-force that is so foundational to misogyny.[80]

[80] Perhaps this is why, as well as finding the film's sexual narrative unsettling, Huddleston dislikes the violence of the final scene: 'the bizarre, pseudo-political and horribly violent ending, which in a much better film might just have worked, [but] here is just creepy, offensive and jaw droppingly crass' (2007). For Etxebeste Gómez, however, in this final scene Ana appears 'totalmente consciente de su destino de salvadora y mártir por la humanidad' (2010: 158).

Ana: the hysterical patient

We have seen Ana bent into approximations of the hysterical arch, but the final and most unequivocal statement of her hysteria is in the photograph and film taken during one of her hypnosis sessions, where she is bent back into a rigid arch, almost levitating off the table in tension. Anglo shows her the image, in which a crowd of onlookers is visible clustered around her, and explains that two important practitioners in the field of hypnosis travelled from Russia and Mexico to see her 'performance'. In the picture, Ana is lying on an examination table, her hips raised above the rest of her body, her arms pressing down by her sides and her head tilted slightly back.

Figure 8: Ana 'performing' the hysterical *arc-en-cercle* at Chez Justine.

The prominent figure of a tall mustachioed man in a grey suit – presumably one of the experts – is visible peering over Anglo's shoulder at Ana's flexed body. Linda (who is, as discussed, a complex substitute for Medem) can be seen in the foreground, holding her video camera and recording her own subjective 'view' of Ana, within the frame of the supposedly objective one projected onscreen. A largely indiscriminate

cluster of men and women is visible behind Anglo and the other man. The examination table is cream and the room's red walls add to the womb-like atmosphere. This image recall Bourgeois' installation piece *Cell (Arch of Hysteria)* (1993), which we discussed in relation to *La piel* in chapter three; here, the scene appears like a version of the sculpture come to life, actually populated by the onlookers that Bourgeois' work suggests are watching.

Ana's arched pose also recalls *La piel's* establishing sequence, when we are first introduced to Vera, bent backwards in a similarly arched position over the arm of a sofa. In Almodóvar's explicit homage to Bourgeois, Vera's arms are extended above her head, elongating her shape further, while Ana's remain in contact with the examination table beneath her. The previous chapter established the explicit link between Almodóvar's *mise-en-scene* and Bourgeois' androgynous bronze sculpture *Arch of Hysteria*, and we can extend it here to contextualise this moment in Medem's film - as Loxham also observes, Anglo's photograph of Ana mid hysterical spasm references the photographs Charcot took of his female subjects in similar poses (2014: 91). As we have established, photography and hysteria have a long established association; Didi-Huberman explains that 'photography was in the ideal position to crystallise the link between the fantasy of hysteria and the fantasy of knowledge' (2003: xi), fantasies that fall on opposite sides of the divide between History and hystory, subjectivity and objectivity, and fact and fiction. While images of Charcot's patients show their faces to be contorted, Ana's, like Vera's, is expressionless and serene. Instead, Ana presents as a sanitised interpretation of the hysteric in extremis, concerned with aesthetics over verisimilitude, an idealised image that does not disrupt the screening (display) of Ana-as-object-of-desire and Ana-as-object-of-medical-curiosity while simultaneously screening (obscuring) the less visually palatable truth of this disorder.

We examine the photo onscreen from Ana's point of view, first looking down at it in 'our' hand, and then in close up, with the camera

slowly tracing the image as we might imagine her gaze to do the same. As 'we' look at 'ourself' (Ana) in the photograph, the camera panning slowly, voyeuristically over the length of our/Ana's body, Anglo says, 'te propongo que lleguemos hasta el final' (Medem 2007a: 101), which in the English subtitles evokes slang for sex – to 'go all the way' – uncomfortably underlining Anglo's double motivation: medical curiosity and sexual desire.[81]

Figure 9: Anglo's gaze – medical curiosity or sexual desire?

Figure 10: The camera pans over the photograph of Ana in the *arc-en-cercle.*

[81] 'The instituted if not institutionalized hysteria of the woman's body persisted and even refabricated itself in the nineteenth century; the asylum, for example, redefined itself as the medicalized inversion of the brothel (for a simple step separates the hysteric from the prostitute, that of scaling the walls of the Salpêtrière, and ending up on the street' (Didi-Huberman 2003: 80-81).

Charcot also used hypnosis, and was, of course, known for his emphatically theatrical approach, staging spectacular demonstrations of patients experiencing hysterical attacks in the amphitheatre at the Salpêtrière. During these immensely popular Tuesday Lectures he 'delighted his largely nonmedical public,' going so far as 'to invest each spectator with powers of mastery over the hypnotized subjects' (Didi-Huberman 2003: 235). Obviously this detail is problematic and raises questions about the exploitation of disempowered women facilitated by the social imbalance created by dominant patriarchal structures. Drawing this parallel between Anglo and Charcot helps clarify why Medem's position in relation to this narrative that purports to 'free' women from centuries of abuse is so awkward.

Looking at *Ana* through a hysterical lens, we may interpret the film's poster as a further illustration of the fragmented, hysterical woman. The poster presents an image of Manuela Vellés in close up, where she appears split into three: half her face visible in a soft, naïve expression and brightly lit so that her green eye glows, then three quarters of her face tilted slightly downward, gaze downturned and lips parted in a lustful expression, and finally a quarter view of her face turned mostly away from the camera, clearly grimacing, mouth wide, and also in shadow [Fig. 11].

Figure 11: The poster for *Ana* showing three different emotional states.

This image calls to mind the theatrical masks of Ancient Greece, arranged in expressions of comedy and tragedy, which in turn recalls Didi-Huberman's thoughts on masks in hysteria:

> Hysteria reveals itself in histrionics and a tragic mask turned flesh; and at the same time there is a veil, dissimulation; and at the same time a naïve, sincere gift of multiple identifications (2003: 164).

He then quotes Bataille's statement that 'a mask is chaos turned into flesh' (2003: 263), and here we find a further connection: Vallés' face is a mask not only for the absent Ana Medem, but also all the other women in her imagined past lives. Bearing in mind Showalter's statement that 'the quantity of hysterical energy does not decrease but flows into new channels and takes new names' (1997: 15), the hysteria of past female incarnations can be understood to be flowing through Ana, who, in a hypnotic trance, acts out their deaths. This poster image that invokes the theatrical mask speaks to a multiplicity that is described visually throughout the film as Ana's look evolves and changes to reflect her deepening self knowledge, as it does also to the fact (discussed earlier) that the pitch of her dialogue remains the same throughout – superficial and unsophisticated – in keeping, both with the symbol of the mask, and with the stylistic simplicity of Ana Medem's paintings.

In addition to the photograph of the arching Ana, the centrality of hypnosis to the film's narrative structure lends weight to the focus here on the significance of hysteria. In Charcot's world, hypnosis and hysteria were intimately bound together as sickness and cure; Didi-Huberman goes as far as to state that 'hypnosis was in reality and above all a *recipe for hysteria*' (2003: 185) (original emphasis). If the viewer's experience corresponds to that of Ana (in that Medem's aim here is to show us her point of view), we can see why, for critics like Huddleston. the experience was so frustrating as, for Medem, 'her' 'perspective' resides in a liminal space of chaos and fragmentation, focussed on the lost object. Medem

says: 'I place the chaos in Ana's time travel, in her past, which is made of a shapeless matter that I have dedicated to the concept of the "feminine"' (Diestro-Dopido 2008).[82] This tendency to grant women mythical status in his diegetic worlds means that Medem's female protagonists may look like something conjured out of magical, 'shapeless matter', but also, and importantly, still sculpted by the dominant cultural ideology. The paradox at the heart of *Ana* is that even though its narrative demonstrates the hysteria brought on by patriarchal oppression, the film continues to (perhaps blindly) enact the very same forces of structural violence.

As Eve was created, according to the dominant patriarchal interpretation of this myth, from Adam's spare rib, Medem's woman remains a derivative of the heterosexual masculine perspective. According to Medem's own analogy, Ana functions as a kind of echo chamber constructed from the chaos of his own artistic past, an amalgamation of signifiers of 'femininity' that can be traced via the female characters that appear throughout his work. The 'freedom' of women from a patriarchal past that Medem invokes has numerous connections with traditional (and ancient) notions of woman as unfathomable, as a wandering womb that shape shifts, little more than an untethered concept flying through time like a witch on her broomstick.[83] Motion plays an important role in this discussion, as demonstrated by Didi-Huberman's explanation of the centrality of movement to the experience of hysteria:

> The Greek *hystérikē* can be translated by "she who is always late, she who is intermittent." Yes, she who is intermittent is the hysteric, she is the *intermittent of her body*. She lives with the risk and misfortune of always mis/taking the possession of her body. She feels that perhaps it is not hers; she even attempts, frequently,

[82] <https://www.closeupfilmcentre.com/vertigo_magazine/volume-3-issue-8-winter-2008/chaos-theories/> [Accessed 3/3/17].

[83] Luauté quotes Philippe-Auguste Tissié (1852-1935) who described the disorder as a sort of 'ambulatory automatism', 'compulsive mad travelers, traversing the world but without memory (Luauté 2014: 24); 'It was the symptom, to put it crudely, *of being a woman.* […] This means that the uterus is endowed with the capacity of movement. This means that the woman's sort of "member" is an animal' (Didi-Huberman 2003: 68).

> to take the body of others for her own body. The risk is an endless hesitation, a repeated attempt to cut hesitation short, an unrelenting questioning of misfortune. Where should this body be put? (2003: 111).

Medem's Ana appears quite literally as this woman who is 'intermittent of her body', as the empty vessel of her physical self is possessed by a chaotic series of ghosts from the near and distant past. Consequently, Didi-Huberman's 'unrelenting questioning of misfortune' can relate to Ana's chaos in as far as she can be read as a fictional personification of the inevitably anguished narrative that emerges out of grief, via hysteria.

This intermittence of the body is represented onscreen when Ana goes out for dinner with Justine, Anglo, Lucas, Linda, and Said, and a fish tank full of lobsters triggers a hysterical swoon, during which she appears to have an out of body experience.[84] It begins with a shot of Ana and Linda looking through a fish tank full of lobsters (antennae waggling enthusiastically in the foreground like a phallic joke 'pricking' the image) at Lucas and Said.[85] The lobsters and young men are conflated by the *mise-en-scène*, each one the object of someone's desire, as is emphasised a few seconds later when Justine, 'directing' this social encounter, orders lobster for all of them. The marine imagery is a nod to Medem's frequent use of water as symbolic of the unconscious. The lobster may live for up to seventy years during which time it frequently moults its exoskeleton, suggesting a parallel between the shedding of skins and the narrative representation, here, of reincarnation.[86] The lobster has also functioned as an icon for surrealism since Dalí's *Lobster*

[84] By the 17th century 'a cascade of socially acceptable labels had joined menlancholia and hysteria: vapors, swooning, attacks of the spleen, and hypochondria' (Pearce 2014: 3).
[85] Which echoes the famous scene from Baz Luhrmann's *Romeo + Juliet* (1996) where Romeo (Leonardo Dicaprio) and Juliet (Claire Danes) make eyes at one another through a wall-sized tank of exotic fish. Luhrmann's sequence plays with reflections in such a way that Romeo's face, translucent and ghostly, is superimposed over Juliet's and vice versa, seemingly commenting on the role of ego in the desiring process; that we can only view the object of desire through the prism of our own self.
[86] Not to mention how it reflects back to the previous chapter's discussion of *La piel*.

Telephone (1936). It has also, via Dalí, become associated with the erotic: for the New York World's Fair in 1939 he created *The Dream of Venus*, a multi-media performance piece that included live nude models being 'dressed' in seafood, their genitalia covered by a lobster.

In Medem's scenario, Ana becomes transfixed by the sight of a waiter roughly lifting the condemned creatures out of their tank in preparation for their meal, an image which appears to call forth an association from the depths of her own oceanic subconscious that causes her to faint, in a clear and overt association of violation of women with violation of lobster. Via Ana's faint, and beyond this illustration of lobster as object of violent desire, Medem establishes a relationship between the crustacean and the fugue state of the swoon. In fact, crustaceans are equipped with a mechanism that enables the fast evasion of predators known as the caridoid escape reaction, where they flip their tails by flexing and contracting sharply in order to make a hasty escape. The sight of the captive lobsters' futile attempt to evade capture as they uselessly flex and flip in the waiter's hands sends Ana into her own fugue state, a mental retreat which manifests outwardly in a faint.[87] Onscreen, Ana and the lobsters in the tank are aligned, both objects of desire under observation and unable to escape physically: when Ana is under hypnosis (as the hysterical patient) she is 'absent' from her body, and, like the lobsters in their tank, under the observation of the hypnotist/director/audience, a gaze that is not straightforwardly therapeutic but also, as suggested in the ambiguity of Anglo's desire, perhaps predatory. For Sobchack the fugue state is:

> [A]kin to the polyphonic, interwoven, and multivalenced themes and orientational demands of its musical namesake, psychiatry describes [it] as "a flight from or loss of the awareness of one's own identity, sometimes involving *wandering away from home*, and

[87] This fugue state recalls Sofia (Emma Suarez) in *La ardilla roja*, who literally runs away, but also experiences her own fugue state of amnesia: feigning amnesia is a way of running away without actually moving.

> often occurring as a reaction to shock or emotional stress" (2004: 26).

Ana's faint is an example of precisely this kind of internal 'wandering', and a link between the fugue state and hysterical intermittence. Unable to beat a physical retreat, Ana's agitation at the sight of these objects of desire (the lobsters) throws her (and therefore the viewer) into an alternate time and space: in a single cut, the camera transports us to the desert, to a point of view shot of a dark-skinned baby crying as it is wrenched from 'our' arms.[88] The perspective cuts abruptly back to a shot of the lobsters, agitated in their tank, then to Ana, having a fit, pale and covered in sweat. Said holds her to calm her down, then a shot reverse shot cuts between his concerned face bent over 'us' (seen through Ana's eyes), and Ana seen from his perspective, her form falling backwards into abstract darkness (like Alice in Wonderland down the rabbit hole), in full flight, it would appear, from her own identity.[89]

[88] Etxebeste Gómez explains that *Ana* changed over time, and coincided with other preoccupations of Medem's that were to do with something else he was already working on – he went to the Festival Cine del Sahara in 2003, and ideas began to emerge that he worked back into *Ana* (Etxebeste Gómez 2010: 148).
[89] Stone also uses an Alice analogy when he describes Medem's cinema as demanding 'an Alice-like journey' down a variety of different holes (2007: 40).

Figure 12: 'Hysterical' Ana.

For a spit second, her image on the screen could easily be that of one of Charcot's hysterical patients [Fig. 12]. The intercalated desert scene that follows is a literal example of the way that hysterical Ana enters a fugue state, becomes intermittent of her body, and 'wanders away from home', back in time to take up the subjectivity of a 'late' (as in deceased) version of herself. In this way, the film makes manifest the complex tension between the literal, geographical movement undertaken by the protagonist and the internal flight that is a reaction to the fact that the representation of women is so frequently 'petrified in the patriarchal imaginary' and fixed to 'a motionless myth or fantasy role' (J. Evans 1996: 10).

From this, we should move to examine the ways in which the desire for an object that is out of reach can incite hysteria not only in the object itself, here represented clearly by Ana's shocked fugue state and flight in response to an image of violent possession, but in the desiring subject. It is useful to return to the point made earlier about Charcot's relationship to his patients, and about Medem's personal connection to this film. Dwelling on the perverse pleasure to be found in the observation of hysteria, Loxham notes that *Ana*:

> [R]estates the complex imbrication of the male author with a female character that Stone elaborated. This time it is a male psychoanalyst whose hypnosis of Ana suggests a problematic relationship of power and suggestion once more enmeshed within the use of language (2014: 90).

This 'complex imbrication' appears to echo the relationship between Charcot and his hysterical patients. Here, Medem initially presents us with chaotic/hysterical Ana, followed by a number of characters that may be read as emblematic of different elements of the 'Charcot' scenario – the diegetic audience to Ana's hysterical experiences embodies these various different aspects of Charcot: Justine as Charcot the patron of the arts; Anglo as Charcot the medic; and Linda as Charcot the voyeur, representing a threefold perspective from which (perverse) pleasure might be derived from the hysterical spectacle; Didi-Huberman's observation that, 'in any case there is an imaginary pairing of the hysteric and her image-taking physician' (2003: 169), is particularly poignant here. The camera combines these three perspectives trained on a single hysterical subject, Ana, and as such serves as a powerful comment on the magnetic appeal of hysteria that is at once voyeuristic, artistic, and medical. Here, it is Charcot split into three who projects qualities associated with fragmentation and femininity onto his patient, and who provides the link made here between hypnosis, fragmented femininity, projection and the abuse of power and privilege. Woman is the framed object of the gaze, illustrating the point Irigaray made as far back as 1985 that woman's 'entry into a dominant scopic economy signifies, again, her consignment to passivity: she is to be the beautiful object of contemplation' (1985: 26). The hysteric cast as object in relation to the gaze of an inquisitive doctor is a dynamic also noted by Showalter, who explains that Charcot 'brought an artist's eye – the observational gift Freud would later term *visual* – to the study of hysterical bodies' (1997: 31). By presenting Ana as a hysterical body in need of framing and regulating, it could be argued that whilst Medem may intend to draw our

attention to women's paralysis in the 'gaze' he also runs the risk of simply mimicking the Charcot scenario and, therefore, propagating myths of feminine complexity, unreadability, and threat.

The narrative arc of Ana's evolution echoes Deleuze and Guattari's suggestion that women are 'becomings' rather than 'organisms'. They argue that 'women are "anorganisms", between body and mind, human and animal, plethora and lack, as all becomings are the being between' (Deleuze and Guattari 1987: 277). Ana represents this view of women from a masculine perspective of a 'being between' in her enactment of the permeable boundaries between conscious and unconscious behaviours and identities, with a strong symbolic connection to nature and the animal, both abundant in her many past lives and empty in her lack of fixed identity. This 'being between' not only echoes hysterical intermittence, but also encourages us to revisit the shape of the hysterical arch, a bridge that straddles the space between one state and another. MacCormack elaborates:

> Becoming is not the marriage of forms but the alchemy of contents, content as verb (expressive, dynamic content) not noun (informative form or bit). The alliance element is usually traditionally subjugated: woman, animal and music (because, like mathematics and dance, signifiers have no default signifieds thus its signification is not stable) (2003: 34).

Medem's fictional woman combines these subjugated elements. It is the alchemy of this combination of signifiers that forms the alliance that 'becomes' the on-screen Ana, who is the definition of an unstable signifier bent on revenge: woman (Ana/Manuela Vellés); animal (dove); and music (Pook's score that, as discussed earlier, Medem describes as slowly filling up Ana's depths with an ancient feminine energy).

In his study of Charcot's iconography, Didi-Huberman refers to the Salpêtrière as a '*citta dolorosa* confining four thousand incurable or mad women' (2003: xi). If, as Showalter notes, a link should be drawn between the medical representation of hysteria (via Charcot's famous

photographs) and the artistic expression of that condition, I am arguing here that Justine's artists' residence echoes Charcot's Parisian hospital. In addition to the parallels already drawn between Justine's position in relation to her young protégés and Charcot presiding over 'his' hysterics, onscreen, Ana's body may be interpreted as a *citta dolorosa* of its own; a visually pleasing container filled with centuries of incurable grief and injustice.[90] Describing the relationship between patients and doctors at the Salpêtrière as one of 'desires, gazes, and knowledge' (2003: xi), Didi-Huberman continues to emphasise the relationship between hysteria, spectacle and the physicians' 'insatiable desire for images of Hysteria' (2003: xi). As will become clear later on, this account of the *Iconographie* reads like a description of Ana's past deaths: 'it contains everything: poses, attacks, cries, *"attitudes passionnelles"*, "crucifixions," "ecstasy," and all the postures of delirium' (Didi-Huberman 2003: xi). Focusing attention on the interrelation between pleasure and pain in the erotics of spectatorship and *jouissance,* particularly with reference to a dominant male gaze that appears to take pleasure in the recurring image of a female body in distress, Ana's body itself may be interpreted as a 'city of grief' populated by the ghosts of murdered women, a personification of the Salpêtrière itself, a traumatic place described as 'the mecca of female death' (Didi-Huberman 2003: 13).

The climactic dénouement finally delivers, onscreen, the violence that this narrative has been referencing and miming up until then. Like the other two films examined here, and unlike the violence perpetuated at the Salpêtrière, these films end with an act of violence that sees the feminine ultimately elude possession by the masculine.[91] Medem's cinema repeatedly frames the violent domination of women by men in relation to a phallic drive to conquer Mother Nature, and this theme reaches its

[90] This once again calls to mind Dalí's *Venus de Milo With Drawers* (1936), which we looked at in conjunction with *Cet obscur objet* in chapter two – another example of a symbol of femininity that might contain mysteries 'in her drawers'.
[91] See Walusinski (2014: 72).

apotheosis in the somewhat clunky symbolism of *Ana*'s final scene.[92] Like Eve before the fall, Ana begins the film naked and innocently unaware in her Balearic Eden, but ends it as Delilah, in full knowledge of her sexual power and exploiting it to her own vengeful ends. Rather than choosing these spectacularly visual demises, so often reproduced in art, Medem/Ana chooses to take revenge via defecation, which the dominant traditions of art history would tend to align with the unmentionable and unrepresentable abject. Ana ends the film as an avenging femme-fatale-come-superhero; dressed all in black with her highly stylised black bob.

Ana 'flies' in a glass elevator up the modern, phallic building (so directly at odds with her Ibizan cave origins) to Mister Halcon's suite. Her stance is strong and determined; legs shoulder width apart, in a nod to the classic superhero pose. As she 'lands', the air puffs her skirt just like Superman's cape, the embodiment of Creed's castrating 'woman who seeks revenge on men who have raped or abused her in some way' (1993: 123), and, according to this mystical narrative, also seeking vengeance for years of injustice on behalf of womankind. In this account of the castrating female of myth, an American politician and the Iraq war symbolise patriarchy, pitting the greed of white, Western political power against the ancient, cave-dwelling mysticism represented by Osdad Ciaca.[93] The violent fight that ensues enacts an 'uncovering' of the core trauma that has haunted this narrative from the start, finally staging the battle of the sexes foretold by the clash between dove and falcon in the prologue. Until now, the ever-present threat of violence has been depicted from the point of view of the victim, through mime or through animation, so that, unlike the Freudian primal scene, the viewer has not actually witnessed the event without the 'protection' of metaphors. Here,

[92] For example, as demonstrated in the opening sequence of *Vacas* in which a male *aizkolari* hacks at a tree trunk with an axe.

[93] Mitchell describes Bourgeois as follows: 'A pioneer of feminist art, Bourgeois realised that her task was not to personalise the political but to politicise the personal' (2014: 14). Medem appears to be attempting the same – by framing his personal grief in this way, suturing it to grief on a wider scale, as symbolised by the hawk and the dove, connecting it to a more collective grief about the injustices of the Iraq war.

an objective camera shows us Mister Halcón using a lamp base shaped like a Greek marble column brutally to beat Ana, who exclaims, without flinching, 'this column is doric [sic]. And I am Greek' (Medem 2007a: 172) [Fig. 13].

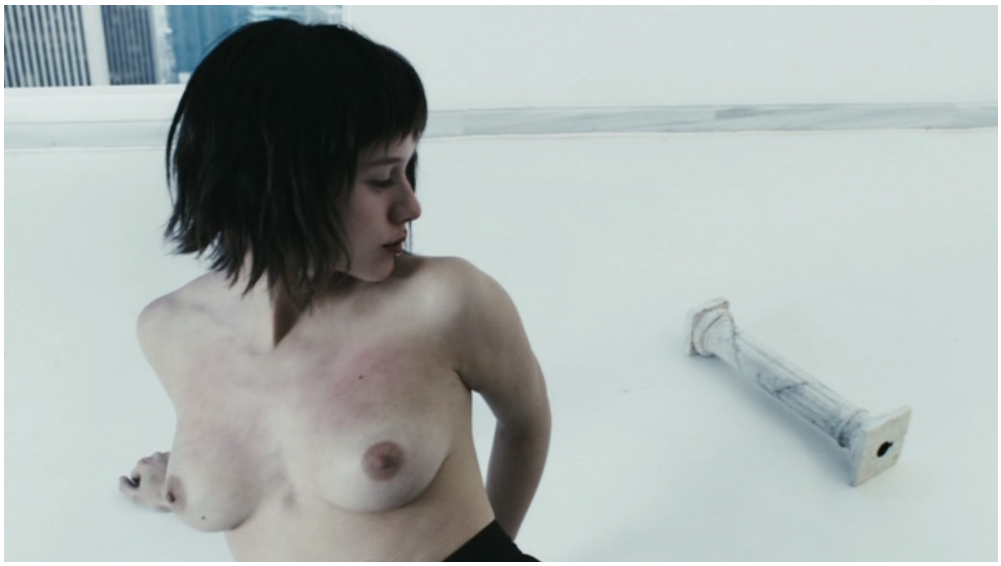

Figure 13: Ana contemplates Halcón's weapon of choice.

The Doric order is associated with masculine qualities, and this symbolism of white masculine History violently attacking the feminine is far from subtle, but the tragi-comic proclamation that Ana is Greek takes on an added significance if we read it directly in conjunction with the representations of hysteria in this film.

Recalling Didi-Huberman's statement that the hysteric is an 'intermittent' (2003: 111) figure that struggles to take possession of her own body, Ana's words may be interpreted as an act of naming and accepting her hysterical, multiple condition. For Loxham, 'Ana's liberation comes when she frees herself from the women who inhabit her subconscious mind' (2014: 91). Yet the stage directions would appear to contradict this reading: 'La voz de ANA, insultando y gritando, se desdobla en otras voces distintas de mujer, como si desde dentro se manifestaran a coro sus ancestras' (Medem 2007a: 169). This suggests the integration of the identities that haunt Ana, rather than her liberation

from them. This containment of multiplicity echoes Creed's monstrous feminine, but it also suggests the path to enlightenment and power is via forensic examination of the self and its past. During this brutal combat, the camera cuts from Ana's perspective to Halcón's, with point of view flashbacks to Osdad Ciaca's death. The flashbacks from the point of view of the ancient goddess show a masculine assailant, dressed like a bird and wielding an axe, chopping and slicing at her body, cutting off her feet [Fig. 14].[94]

Figure 14: Ana-as-Osdad Ciaca's severed leg.

The different temporal strands converge and collapse, and the camera cuts to Ana on the Indian reservation, under hypnosis in a cave and acting out the ancient scene of mutilation we have just witnessed, speaking in Hopi and declaring her powers of reincarnation. As the camera returns to the narrative present, Ana says (in English) 'you can never defeat me because I am the mother of good men' (Medem 2007a: 171). This statement inverts Creed's mythological woman as monstrous womb. In this scenario, Ana's triumphant primeval womb begets good men.

[94] The horror of a severed leg calls to mind Buñuel's *Viridiana* and the mutilation of Vera's body on the operating table in *La piel*.

Las vidas de Ana: communicating across the void

Medem's hyperactive 'body-snatching' (Stone 2007: 163) camera travels across time. His films explore the way that subjective identity and reality are stitched together, in a patchwork of tangled personal and political histories. Movement – whether through time or subjective points of view – is a key element in his untethered cinematic style, and this section will analyse the different techniques Medem employs to communicate across temporal and subjective voids. Firstly, let us focus on the contrasting representation of woman: the dynamic, wandering hysterical womb versus the fixed, idealised statue.[95] This provocative representation of woman as at once static myth and travelling chaos can be illustrated by close attention to the sequence on Ismael's boat. Ana has secretly boarded, but is soon discovered by the sailor who is initially furious, but who allows her to stay.[96] After a journey of several days, their boat approaches the island of Manhattan. Ana turns her head, suddenly serious, and the camera cuts to The Statue of Liberty framed in a long shot. A cut to medium shot shows Ana's transfixed expression, the statue's verdigris colouring a match for the irises in her widened eyes that is further echoed by the sea, visible and audible behind her, before cutting back to a reverse shot in medium close up of the famous statue. The camera bobs slightly with the motion of the boat, emphasizing that this is Ana's point of view, then cuts to a slow and meaningful zoom onto her face, accompanied by a swell of music. A reverse close up of the statue's stoic expression frames its head, neck and shoulders centre screen on the same scale as Ana in the previous shot, casting them as reflections of one another. We then cut to Ismael, also framed on the same scale and, as his eyes flick from one side of the screen to the other, we realise he is looking from Liberty to Ana, acting out the connection the

[95] There is something in this opposition that relates to observations made by Stone about Medem's constant interrogation of the rigidity of Appollonian consciousness versus the unconscious power and creativity of the Dionysian state (2007: 174).

[96] Like Buñuel's Mathieu, Ismael is a man trying to flee from 'woman trouble' unaware that he is literally taking it with him as stowed away cargo.

previous reverse shots have already urged us to make: Ana is moving closer to liberation.

On the other hand, the contrast between the objects of Ismael's shifting gaze encapsulates the polarity at the heart of this narrative, emulating the director's own dichotomy between his well-intentioned representation of the liberation of a living woman and another petrified monument to static and reductive feminine archetypes. A police helicopter then approaches the boat (invading the romantic atmosphere created by the idealised representation of Ana and the statue) in what we may retrospectively read as an echo of the film's prologue and a symbolic enactment of its final sequence, where the fist of patriarchal law (the falcon/Mr Halcon) will try one final time to crush the heroine (dove/Ana). Twenty minutes later, the penultimate sequence in this countdown (intertitle number one), returns Liberty to the screen to emphasise this point. Reunited, Ana and Said are in her tiny New York City apartment. Their failed attempt to have sex represents the power of reincarnation over *amour fou* with resolution provided, both symbolically and literally, by the 'return' of the primal lost object – the maternal breast.[97]

As Said delivers the information about Ana's past maternal relationship to him, he is framed in a medium close up sitting against a wall. Pinned above his bare right shoulder is a crude sketch of The Empire State Building, a classic symbol of masculine, phallic drive. As if suggesting these are characters trapped by their own gendered mystification – the phallic (male) tower, and the petrified (female) symbol of liberty – Ana sits opposite him, and in a mirror image, above her bare right shoulder is pinned another of her sketches, this time of her (with the distinctive fringed bob) and The Statue of Liberty [Fig. 15]. Liberty is depicted in profile, while Ana faces out of the frame peering round the statue, her head inclined to the side. The flat, two-dimensional style means they may be read, visually, as standing side by side, mouths

[97] We are reminded of the scene from earlier in the film where Said is pictured sucking on Ana's breast, which retrospectively gains more significance.

aligned in a single line that unites them across the boundaries of their faces, emphasising their connection.

Figure 15: Ana in her New York apartment.

Significantly, this painting forms a pair with another of Ana's pieces from much earlier on in the narrative. Examined together, they illustrate the arc of her narrative development. Immediately after intertitle number seven (thirty-one minutes into the film) one of Ana's paintings is 'brought to life' by animation while, as mentioned earlier, she narrates a letter to her father (in voiceover). The animated sequence shows a male figure in blue robes facing a female figure in pink ones against a backdrop of desert landscape. The man reaches inside the woman's chest, his arm penetrating all the way up to his wrist, illustrating Ana's words that a man has finally 'taken' her (Medem 2007a: 69) [Fig. 16].

Figure 16: Ana's painting, after falling for Said.

Martin-Márquez reads this imagery as demonstrative that Ana's love for Said is what 'draws out' her reincarnated soul (2009: 299), however it also reads more problematically as the visualisation of the connection with desire and violence, and of the way the object of desire becomes integrated (violently) with the desiring subject.[98] The animated woman then moves to face out of the frame. She presses her face close to the man's (still in profile) so that her mouth aligns with his, once again traversing the border of their faces. Viewed alongside the sketch of Ana and Liberty (in a similar pose), these *mise-en-abîme* images aptly demonstrate the arc of Medem's narrative: the former an illustration of the discovery of Ana's lost object, Said, and the overwhelming experience of *amour fou*, and the latter an image of her bound to her new desire – sovereignty and freedom.

Viewed from the context of the earlier, animated painting and this sketch, the Statue of Liberty sequence emphasises the way that the female body has been framed by social and political discourse (and the art that it inspires): an allegorical symbol that is weighed down by morality and ideology. If Great Britain has Britannia, France has Marianne, the

[98] In Freud's words, 'in one class of cases being in love is nothing more than object-cathexis on the part of the sexual instincts with a view to directly sexual satisfaction, a cathexis which expires, moreover, when this aim has been reached; this is what is called common, sensual love' (2001: 111).

"Leader of the Free World" has Liberty, Medem offers us the complex, but to some extent equally 'petrified' image of Ana, who is both symbol of liberty and eroticised object of desire, both Oedipal mother, and icon of emancipation. As Ana Medem's paintings are animated and 'come to life' for the viewer, the eponymously 'chaotic' onscreen Ana 'animates', the feminine icon traces her journey, from movement to stasis, as both 'wandering' hysteric and deity petrified by her objectification. This movement exposes the chaos, the excess of the 'shapeless matter' from which these impossible icons are sculpted, and their detrimental effect on the living female body on which they are modelled.

On their journey across the Atlantic, Ana evolves from her position as Ismael's passenger to that of figurehead of his boat (named *Linda,* which translates both as a name, and the adjective 'pretty'). Historically, the figurehead has often taken female form, her arched back traditionally positioned to mimic the shape of the prow, although not explicitly here. Figureheads were totems for sailors like Ismael, whose name may be a nod to Melville's famous seafaring narrator in *Moby Dick* (1851), a narrative also constructed around the quest to possess (and kill) the object of the protagonist's desire.[99] After days at sea, Ana arrives in New York perched at the prow like a talismanic figurehead [Fig. 17].

[99] The Biblical Ishmael is associated with archery, and in Rabbinic Judaism he is a wicked but repentant figure, both pleasingly appropriate details for Medem's ageing Don Juan (who, it must be noted, reverberates with echoes of Buñuel's Mathieu), a philandering masculine figure constantly assuming his position of dominance. The Egyptians used holy birds on the prows of their boats, so Ismael the archer arrives in the New World with a 'holy bird' as the figurehead of his ship, and Ana becomes somewhat deified – she has made her journey from 'fucking bird' to 'holy bird', from prey to goddess/myth, in an example of the double direction of the arch of Medem's feminine incarnations, always based in each of these extremes.

Figure 17: Ana perched on the prow of Ismael's boat, the Linda.

Once more, she is represented as simultaneously fixed and mobile; physically, she is both on her quest to find Said (and herself), and tied to the prow, in echo of the reactionary iconography of femininity that confines the film narrative, tethered to conceptions of woman as mystical, ancient power. This speaks both to the way that Medem (according to his own account) mythologises his female characters, and to the duality noted by Etxebeste Gómez: 'las películas de Medem están dominadas por la importancia de la dualidad en el ser humano, cuya univocal connexion con la muerte es indudable' (2010: 61), as demonstrated Ana and her split personae.

Ana is symbolic of the wandering womb, trapped by the cliché that is female hysteria from the masculine perspective and pigeonholed as spectacle and/or deified recipient of the gaze. The connotations of this sequence can be taken further: the sea, and the hypnotic bobbing of the *Linda* on water (and related drowning imagery) encourages the viewer to spot the interconnected layers of metaphor. For example, if Ana is wind, she is not only the mythical figure fixed to the prow of Ismael's sailboat but also the force that drives it forward; she is a representation of the

object of desire and the force of desire itself. [100] No matter how far she travels, her character is inescapably bound to this objectification of her as confined by mythology, whether on the part of the characters with whom she shares the diegetic space, the extra-diegetic audience, or the director himself.

In Greek mythology, Pandora was the first woman on Earth (an alternative Eve), described by Robert Graves as a figure 'whom Zeus had made as foolish, mischievous, and idle as she was beautiful' (2001: 145). This statement might well be applied to our first viewing of naïve and carefree Ana in her Ibizan idyll.[101] Grounded firmly in the natural world, as we know, Medem's cinematic mysticism is demonstrated by his recurring use of epic natural phenomena such as forests, lakes, the sea, and caves. Graves identifies Pandora's association with other Earth goddesses (2001: 148), and it is her connection to Gaea in particular (Greek primordial deity and ancestral mother of all life) that situates her in an Earth goddess lineage that relates directly to Medem's Basque roots and his thematic devotion to telluric goddess worship.[102] It seems that,

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[100] This comparison is emphasised in an earlier shot of Ana lying topless on deck while Ismael controls the boat behind her. She is only visible from the waist up, the camera angled as if balanced on her left hip so that her breasts are framed in medium close up at the bottom of the screen, and the image is highly evocative of the carved figures of topless mermaids so often attached to the front of ships, their eyes closed and heads bent back, ropes of hair tangled against the body of the ship.

[101] There is a connection between Pandora and Prometheus (who we see invoked in *La piel*) - Zeus creates Pandora out of clay, making her the most beautiful woman adorned by all goddesses of Olympus, and sends her to Prometheus's brother, Epimetheus, as a gift. Prometheus warned his brother to reject gifts from Zeus, so he does not accept. It is anger at this that fuels Zeus' punishment of Prometheus, where he chains the man naked to a mountain so a vulture tears at his liver every day, locked into a repetitive cycle of eternal unrelenting pain (as is evoked in Ledgard's punishment of Vicente). Epimetheus then marries Pandora out of fear, rendering her both object of desire and terror.

[102] This is expressed in his work: *Vacas* and the 'agujero encendido'; Mari in *Tierra,* 'related to the Basque goddess Amari, who was said to live underground and whose worshippers left offerings for her in caves' (J. Evans 2007a: 68), which obviously relates to Ana who is a cave-dweller; *Las moscas* in *La ardilla*; the centrality of the Earth in *Habitación en Roma*. 'The character of Sofía in *La ardilla* was inspired by legends that also influence the dominant feminine incarnation in *Tierra*' (J. Evans 2007a: 68). See also Angulo and Rebordinos (2004: 130).

like Pandora, the women on Medem's screen must be 'all gifted' and 'all giving' (Graves 2001: 148), and meet an excess of expectations ranging from ingénue to dominatrix. As the plot reveals more about Ana's past lives, the narrative slowly fills Ana-the-onscreen-vessel with these different personae.[103] During this process, the character re-cycles a number of externally signified feminine archetypes. For Loxham, 'it would seem that Medem has finally found the feminist tale that was never quite successful in his previous works' (2014: 92), but is this really the case? I would argue that Ana is, rather, another variation of the same myth. She emerges out of the series of virgin/whore dichotomies that make up Medem's mythology of unstable, but powerful, women associated with animals, and 'Womanhood' is articulated here through a roll-call of feminine archetypes that 'fill' an intermittent Ana, cast as a hysterical symbol of lack: from the dove (of peace), through Venus, Pandora, Creed's monstrous feminine, the hysterical patient, the primordial mother, and the Statue of Liberty.[104]

This narrative structure traces a perverse version of Pandora's famous fable: perversely, it starts with the dove as universal symbol of hope, and then immediately murders it. And we might interpret Ana as, metaphorically, both a reluctant Pandora and the box itself: cycling through her various incarnations – that each enact the evils of the world contained by the mythical box – she eventually emerges as Osdad Ciaca. The murdered dove is reincarnated as an ancient and powerful bird goddess, that we might interpret as an incarnation of Gaea herself (also

[103] We are reminded of the Russian doll imagery discussed in relation to *La piel* – yet another example of woman as containing a multitude of selves and expectations.

[104] For example, *Tierra's* leather-clad Mari (Silke) versus maternal Ángela (Emma Suàrez); *La ardilla roja's* femme fatale Elisa (Susana García Díez) versus perky, blonde Sofia (Emma Suàrez);[104] *Lucía y el sexo*'s sexually voracious and dangerous Belén (Elena Anaya) vs earthy Elena (Najwa Nimri) vs crazy-sexy Lucía (Paz Vega) (not to mention Belén's porn star mother, played by Diana Suàrez); Cristina (Emma Suàrez) and Catalina (Ana Torrent) in *Vacas*, who are mystically linked with the film's eponymous cattle.

'the mother of good men').[105] Ana's own metaphorical blindness to her multiple identities lends itself to this reading of her story as a 'hysterical' narrative:

> Freudians view paralysis in a leg, without organic cause, as a hysterical symptom, both an erection and a castration, while hysterical blindness is both a wish to look at something forbidden and the punishment for such transgression (Showalter 1997: 44).

Medem taps into the viewer's assumed desire to look at the female body as the victim of violence (this look in itself a violent act), seeming to understand that granting this desire is simultaneously a punishment. The palpable but confused anger about violence against women at the heart of this film makes sense when placed in the context of a cultural amnesia or denial that manifests as a widespread hysterical blindness to the problem itself, coupled with a visual landscape saturated with depictions of women as victims.

Perhaps Ana's onscreen journey to consciousness is a fable designed to inspire audiences to follow their own paths to enlightenment; initially, Ana chooses to remain blind, opting for Anglo to hypnotise her in such a way that she will not remember the experience, her motive only that they might find clues that lead them to Said. Symbolically, this wilful blindness seems to represent a reaction to the excesses of desire that conflate fear with pleasure, enabling focus to remain on the object of desire itself, unpolluted by context or process. Encouraging reflection on the structures that facilitate the pleasure we are seeking by becoming 'un-blind' might affect our ability to experience said pleasure with impunity. This is the complexity of a film that presents Ana as both victim and victor, objectified yet still a heroine for objects of desire claiming their right to their own subjectivity. The allegory relates to our cultural relationship to

[105] In the myth, Pandora's box was a 'pithos', a large clay jar that was used to store provisions but also could be a container to bury human bodies. This is relevant to a reading of Ana as a 'mecca of female death', a shell 'containing' the dead bodies of all her past lives.

representations of violence against women and the correlation between the desire to witness and the ensuing 'punishment' that is delivered via the repeated objectification of violated women onscreen.

Here, blindness is associated with fixed objects of desire, statues like Liberty and Venus, and becoming 'un-blind' is related to movement, to opening doors, traversing the world both unconsciously and in reality: to becoming as opposed to being. In the context of *Ana*, this reads as an indictment of our culture's willingness to consume this kind of violence without interrogation, and our resulting complicity in maintaining widespread hysterical blindness. Like Pandora, Ana has the opportunity to open a box of worldly evils, in this case the box of tapes that Linda made of each hypnosis session, labelled 'Las vidas de Ana' [Fig. 18].[106]

Figure 18: Las vidas de Ana.

At this moment, she chooses to confront her own (willed) blindness and watches, as if to suggest that hope lies in confronting the truth. The tapes are labelled with the name of each of Ana's past incarnations, historical figures united by the fact they met their ends at the hands of men, including: Hypatia, a Greek mathematician and philosopher murdered by

[106] It is worth bearing in mind that the 'current avatars of hysteria' are Multiple Personality Disorder and Dissociative Identity Disorder (Luauté 2014: 26), encompassing profound amnesia and the possession of a person by one or more alternate personalities.

a Christian mob; Zenobia, a third century Syrian queen who led a revolt against the Roman Empire before she was eventually defeated by Emperor Aurelian; Hipsicratea, Queen of Pontus who, motivated by love for her husband, became a warrior so she could fight alongside him; Margarita de Angulema, a sixteenth century French princess and writer; Ivanna Kollontai, a feminist and figure of the Russian revolutionary socialist movement; and many more. This list of notable historical women echoes Judy Chicago's iconic installation, *The Dinner Party* (1974-79), designed as a symbolic history – or, indeed, hystory – of women under-represented in, or excised from, the patriarchal narrative [Fig. 19].

Figure 19: *The Dinner Party*, Judy Chicago (1974-79).

As Ana the anima literally takes the lid off her past lives, she is both Pandora and the box, and both (the box and Pandora) are symbols of femininity that function simultaneously as an impossible ideal and as a repository for the world's 'sins', the murdered women she discovers within the tapes, and 'contained' within her previously obscured memories, an account of the brutality of gender violence.[107]

[107] Ana's re-birth (Venus 're-virginating' in the sea) recalls another resurrection from *Vacas* – Manuel's 'perverse re-birth' (J. Evans, 2007a: 29) from underneath

Ana is multiple, and her identities cross time and geographic locations, but the overarching archetype she embodies is that of the martyred female. This is powerfully articulated in an animated sequence where Ana's metaphorical internal doors are flung open to reveal a stylised representation of the cycle of violence she has suffered through the ages on behalf of womankind. This euphemistic sequence is expressed in the vernacular of Ana Medem's paintings, visualizing/representing terrible acts of violence in a vibrant palette of strong, optimistic colours forming a paradoxical contrast between the violent content and the naïve style. In one image, Ana gets mauled to death by a lion, recalling Vera's rape by Zeca 'the tiger' both in terms of composition and subject matter [Fig. 20].

Figure 20: Ana gets mauled by a lion in a past life.

A reminder of Didi-Huberman's description, quoted earlier, of Charcot's hysterical *Iconographie* is useful when interpreting this animated section: like Charcot's infamous photographic documentation of the hysterical symptoms as enacted by his patients, this animated sequence also 'contains everything', including contorted female bodies

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a pile of cadavers, his face covered in blood, hauling himself out from within the human carrion.

similarly expressing ‘poses, attacks, cries’ and ‘all the postures of delirium’ (Didi-Huberman 2003: xi) [Fig. 21].

Figure 21: From Charcot’s *Iconographie photographique de la Salpêtrière* (1878).

Didi-Huberman describes the ‘increasingly theatricalized’ bodies of Charcot’s hysterics, explaining that ‘hysteria in the clinic became the spectacle, the *invention of hysteria.* Indeed, hysteria was covertly identified with something like an art, close to theater or painting’ (2003: xi) (original emphasis). In *Ana,* the luminous two-dimensionality of these images is reminiscent of stained glass windows, perhaps even of traditional stained glass representations of the Stations of the Cross [Fig. 22]. Echoes of these depictions of individual events from the Passion of

Christ that are so common to Catholic churches resonate in this scene and serve to reinforce Ana's sacrificial martyrdom.[108]

Figure 22: One of Ana's past deaths, in the style of Ana Medem.

This plays into a particular brand of Spanish aesthetics, as identified by Allinson:

> The depiction of violence in Spanish cinema has been polarized between highly stylized forms, where violence is seen purely in terms of sacrifice (war, bullfighting), and the uncompromisingly realistic depiction of human brutality (1997: 318).

[108] 'An actress could never go as "far" or as "deep" as a hysteric, in whatever role she inhabits. Blood always comes of its own accord (a wound opens inside the body!) in the hands of a hysteric "playing" a saint affected with stigmata. But a hysteric, for whom a single role is by no means sufficient, wants to play everything, wants to play too much – and thus can never again be credible' (Didi-Huberman 2003: 164).

Ana employs both of these techniques: the stylised language of Medem's sister's paintings, and the hyper-real violence of the final face-off between Ana and Mister Halcón.

This animated sequence comes fifty minutes (just under half way) through the film, and begins with a close up on Ana's illustrated face, which literally peels off screen left to reveal a floating cosmic corridor of multi-coloured doors, recalling the symbolism of the film's poster by underlining the fact that Ana's face is merely a mask behind which lie many other personalities and archetypes. As the scene unfolds, Ana reads a letter to her father in voiceover, urging him not to worry about her doors. These doors then open to reveal female bodies suffering horrific acts of violence, made palatable by the naïve, figurative style of painting: the first martyr's dead body hangs from a tree, next is a woman engulfed in flames [Fig. 21], followed by a woman impaled on a vast spike that goes in at the anus and out at the mouth, then beheaded, mauled to death by a lion, and finally, speared through her pregnant stomach, before we are left to fill the rest of these gaps with our imaginations as the camera pans around to show the continually extending corridor with yet more doors on either side, stretching out into infinity. The scene is accompanied by the musical score Medem has described as representing an ancient, interior female energy that fills to the point of overflow; the sounds appear to be carried on the wind that we have come to associate with Ana, which blows open these doors so that the atrocities hidden behind them might fall out into the open. The women behind these painted doors represent the clamouring return of the repressed, a history of gender-based violence that has been repressed by the dominant discourse. In her past lives, Ana is repeatedly presented as a powerful female archetype – the explorer, Berber warrior, ancient goddess – yet each time she is overpowered by a man. The perpetrator is consistently missing from the screen, adding drama to the representation, but also leaving a space that implicates the viewer in this historical culture of violence towards women. This is especially meaningful if we bear in mind

critical thinking, from Mulvey onwards, about the violating component of the traditional male gaze. The absence of the aggressor in these vignettes also focuses attention on the victim, who is caught in a grim mimed sequence of death and mutilation.

This technique is repeated to greater effect eleven minutes later, when Linda's edited footage is shown to a captivated audience at Chez Justine. It begins with a slow pan in close-up over Ana's body in projection, contorted into the hysterical *arc-en-cercle,* her torso rigid, hips raised to a seemingly impossible height [Fig. 23].

Figure 23: Linda's film of Ana in the *arc-en-cercle* is show to an audience at Chez Julstine.

The sequence that follows shows Ana, alone in this onscreen *mise-en-abîme*, acting out the various deaths now familiar from the animated section described above, again accompanied by the score, which crescendos and is overlaid by the appropriate sound effects to each example (a crackling fire, or the gruesome sound of a leg being severed). As she enacts the gruesome contortions of her repeated murders onscreen in front of an audience, Chez Justine is once again a direct

parallel with Chez Charcot, providing a stage from which the hysterical patient might play to the crowd. Both these *mise-en-abîme* sequences present art as a frame for the mediation of the return of the repressed. If hysterical seizure is the physical expression of the pressure exerted by the repressed returning, hypnosis offers a 'cure' by staging a direct encounter with the traumatic material in order to integrate, then process it.

Freud conceived of the unconscious as 'an "other scene" where one cannot distinguish between truth and fiction that has been cathected with affect' (Lebeau 2006: 30). Cinema mimics this effect, the screen substituting for the 'other scene', where a reality that closely resembles our own is acted out. Medem's approach to direction would appear to correlate with Metz's view that 'certain phenomena that psychoanalysis has illuminated or can illuminate occur in the cinema' (2001: 22). *Ana* uses the different layers of time and experience to stage an 'other scene' where the boundaries are blurred, and access to this space is may be triggered by Pavlovian responses to stimuli such as the lobsters or the arched shape seen in Said's painting.[109] If hypnosis has correspondences with film-viewing, it also provides a bridge between the self and the internal 'other scene' of the unconscious, offering access to an internal imaginary screen that, like the double meaning of the word itself, both displays and obfuscates. Medem's film appears to believe, like Charcot, that 'hypnosis *alters* the subject' (Didi-Huberman 2003: 234): in purely narrative terms, the diegetic hypnosis facilitates Ana's confrontation and eventual acceptance of her multiplicity. She becomes, in Freudian terms, a complex – that is to say, a collection of cathected ideas about identity and gender (Freud 1995: 44), represented here by each of the repressed memories that hypnosis is able to retrieve. Medem's redemptive concept of selfhood is a catholic blend of elements from the historical to the

[109] Medem describes discovering Freud, and states: 'leí y descubrí a Freud, el subconsciente, la interpretación de los sueños… Me result muy fascinante […] Pero insisto, me sentía más seguro sabiendo que iba a ser psiquiatra, un psiquiatra cineasta *amateur*, pero nunca director de cine' (Angulo and Reobrdino 2004: 174).

archetypal, and global to local, but that is ultimately undermined by a (presumably unconscious) bias that frames the avenging protagonist – Ana – from the distinctly traditional perspective of the heterosexual male gaze.

Santaolalla identifies the way Medem's films use the look 'as the instrument guaranteeing access to those multiple layers of reality, connecting those worlds which are located "at a slight angle" to reality' (1998: 334). In *Ana*, hypnosis grants Ana access to these multiple 'angles', allowing audiences also to see things (literally and figuratively) from a different perspective. Medem demonstrates this 'slight angle' in fairly literal terms when, forty-six minutes into the film, Ana finally agrees to watch one of Linda's videos. At this point in the narrative, Ana is living in an apartment of Justine's with Linda and Anglo, so that they can work more intensely to uncover the stories in Ana's unconscious and at decoding what Anglo identifies as her central problem, telling her, 'creo que llevas dentro un abismo' (Medem 2007a: 81). Justine joins the trio, and together they watch Linda's most recent recording. The scene begins with Ana framed in a medium shot, two of her brightly coloured painted doors (in the style of Ana Medem) visible behind her. She is simultaneously speaking aloud in French and miming writing a letter, describing how in this particular past life she was a French explorer who went to the mountain K2 in order to get the attention of her wayward lover. The picture is slightly distorted, with lines running across the image alerting us to the fact that we are watching a screen within a screen, a classic *mise-en-abîme*. The image quality on the diegetic television screen is noticeably poorer, highlighting the difference between analog and digital, and demarcating different temporal spaces. Medem first entirely digital film was *Lucía*, and *Ana* was filmed using a Sony HDC-F950 high definition digital camera which was, at that time, the latest

technology, and its first use in European cinema (Diestro-Dopido 2008).[110]

The saturation on the diegetic screen renders Ana a ghostly hologram, washed out and pale against the vibrant background created by her painted doors [Fig. 24].

Figure 24: Ana appears ghostly on the analogue screen.

This contrast (analogue versus digital) echoes the quality of memory: remembering is not a linear process and some memories will appear in sharper focus, depending where on the spectrum between conscious and unconscious recollection they dwell. Cutting back to the group sitting on the sofa, watching, the camera then adopts their point of view and focuses on Ana on a small TV in medium shot. The backdrop provided by the red wall behind it emphasises Ana's de-saturated figure on the small screen, reinforcing the ghostliness of a woman we are supposed to believe is mediating the spirit of a dead Frenchwoman. As Ana watches herself onscreen, she becomes distressed, and complains of feeling cold.

[110] <https://www.closeupfilmcentre.com/vertigo_magazine/volume-3-issue-8-winter-2008/chaos-theories/> [Accessed 17/2/17]

Strains of ethereal music slowly crescendo, interlaced with the sound of the wind blowing that is associated with the ill-fated dove from the prologue. The camera then appears to mimic the dying bird's hectic flight, moving chaotically towards and around Ana's face in close up, dipping and swooping. We cut to a point of view shot from Ana's perspective within the memory/hallucination, looking down at her own fur-clad body surrounded by snow and ice, writing in a notebook. A quick and complex series of jump cuts between the three realities clarifies the way in which they are all connected: Ana in the present, framed by an invisible, objective camera/eye; Ana onscreen, acting out the traumatic memory unlocked by hypnosis and recorded/framed by Linda's camera/eye in the past; and Ana as the French explorer, from her own point of view and on location on K2, presenting an alternate reality that exists alongside the one we know and inhabit in a chronology all its own, waiting, latent in the unconscious, for discovery.

Medem connects the three temporal layers by jumping shots between each version of Ana posed in the same way, lying down on the ground. It begins with an extreme close up of Ana on the TV screen lined with static, who starts to lie her body down. The 'real' Ana then mirrors the scene onscreen and, in medium shot, apes her recorded image and lies down into Linda's lap. Finally, a chaotic scene of a snowy world turning on its side fills the screen, as 'we' once again adopt Ana's point of view as she lies down in the cold acting out this particular past life. The next series of shots introduces a yet more distant layer of reality: from the perspective of Ana-as-French-explorer, we experience her hallucination, as her husband appears to come to her rescue. He approaches, smiling widely, and lies down beside her/us. At the same time, Anglo says in voiceover, 'tranquila Ana, soy yo. Estoy aquí para rescatarte' (Medem 2007a: 89). The camera then cuts to an extreme close up of present-day Ana crying, with Anglo holding her, his face pressed against the side of hers, then cuts to a medium close up of Ana in the video footage, lying on a bed, whispering in French that she is slipping away.

Back in the present, we view Ana's crying face in close up. The focus is on Ana in the foreground until Anglo's head comes into the shot as he leans down to comfort her; between their faces we see Linda and Justine, blurred by the short depth of field, but their concern is nevertheless discernable. The camera's gaze (and ours with it) moves from Ana and Anglo, as if 'we' are there, a fifth person crouched down on the floor beside her. The camera then cuts to an extreme close up (on the diegetic television screen) of meta-Ana's eye so that it is centre screen. For a director so famously preoccupied with matters of the gaze this merits close attention. Ana is crying, being attended to by her 'husband' hallucinated on the imagined slopes of K2, and by Anglo in 'reality'. Large and centre screen, her eye is swollen from crying and explicitly yonic, the swollen lids abstracted by the camera's extreme close up and in the abstraction rendered vulva-like, a sex that sees [Fig. 25].[111]

Figure 25: Ana's eye made yonic in close up.

[111] 'We find here once again the rhythmic structure of this pulsation of the slit whose function I referred to last time. The appearance/disappearance takes place between two points, the initial and the terminal of this logical time – between the instant of seeing, when something of the intuition itself is always elided, not to say lost, and that elusive moment when the apprehension of the unconscious is not, in fact, concluded, when it is always a question of an 'absorption' fraught with false trails' (Lacan 1979: 32).

This recalls a scene from *La ardilla roja* in which protagonist Sofia puts a teenage admirer's hand down her trousers and 'bites' him with her vagina dentata, although here, of course, the vulva metaphorically substitutes a mouth with teeth. Medem's close up of the eye-as-vulva recalls Bataille's erotic novella *L'histoire de l'oeil* (1928), in which eggs, bulls testicles, and eventually an eye provide vaginal stimulation for the book's depraved heroine, Simone. In this context, the shot may be interpreted as a comment on the consuming drive of desire, its need to symbolically ingest the objects that stimulate it, whether literally through the mouth or vulva, or figuratively with the eyes. Ana's eye-as-vulva provide metaphorical comment on the erotics of spectatorship, as if posing the question: at what point, if ever, does the object of desire look back? And if it does, from where does its gaze emanate? The scene ends with an even more extreme close up of analogue Ana's eyelid closing in slow motion, rescinding access to these unconscious 'other scenes'. Sobchack's description of cinema's power to create the 'vertigo and existential peril of not knowing where you are, the dissolution of the very spatial and temporal grounding necessary to placing and securing one's self-identity' (2004: 26), is exploited in this example that jumps between temporal strands, unified by Ana's single body.[112]

This film communicates the desire to repossess the lost object metaphorically via narrative to great effect. After Said – Ana's lost object – disappears, Ana and Linda make a creative response to a piece of his video art that demonstrates the bittersweet pleasure/pain in exploring this phenomenon, recalling points made earlier about the way film and memory become interrelated. Said's video is a close up on his face, where only his eyes are visible, framed by black fabric wrapped around the rest of his face like a balaclava. Ana and Linda film their reply in a

[112] Sobchack continues, citing cinematic 'examples of losing one's orientational moorings in a vertically elongated and polyphonic space-time that collapses and conflates past and future in and with what becomes a vertiginous and all-consuming present' (2004: 26).

lunar-esque landscape (its wide-open skies recalling the dreamy vistas of *Lucía*). Linda, camera in hand, is wrapped in a long piece of black fabric. Ana holds on to the other end of it and runs around her friend, laughing, before then putting the fabric between her own legs [Fig. 26].

Figure 26: Ana and Linda film their response to Said's film.

In the following scene, the two films play opposite each other at Chez Justine, and Medem stages a shot-reverse shot by cutting between Said's film – his framed 'look' – and Ana and Linda's – with Ana's body framed in close up from the waist to the knee, running with the length of fabric tucked between her thighs. The black cloth appears to reach from one screen to the other, connecting Said's eyes with Ana's groin, and creating the illusion that the fabric stretches across the spatial and temporal void not only in literal terms between the two films/screens, but symbolically between the lovers, uniting them once more in the face of so much physical and metaphorical distance. An unequivocal statement about the relationship between love, sight, and desire, the fabric connects Said's 'look' with Ana's vulva, commenting on her potential complicity in the objectifying gaze that we can frame as a response to the eye-as-vulva, sight-as-consumption, erotics of vision discussed earlier. This sequence also demonstrates the power of art to communicate across a

void, something that carries extra significance in the context of a film that is a posthumous ode to its director's sister.

Macdonald writes:

> As representation, art stands between artist and spectator, subject and object, form and matter, concept and thing. As text it hovers at the borders of categories, and as simulacrum it is subsumed in a field of images that bear no relation to 'reality'. If viewed in psychological terms, it is a point of mediation between the self and an 'other'. In bodily and social terms, it is a prosthetic, an extension of the body and a point of intercession between one living body and another, and therefore a mediator in sexual relations. In this last sense, art is also always erotic, especially in the form of the naked female body (2001: 4).

Projected opposite Said's film – in the same room, on the same scale, and on walls that face one another – Ana and Linda's response operates in precisely this way, and although Ana is not naked, the illusion that the black fabric reaches across from one screen to the other functions as a literal embodiment of Macdonald's prosthetic and point of intercession. In *Ana* and *La piel* both female protagonists suffer trauma that is then underlined and communicated via art. As we know, Vera/Vicente uses the new language provided by Bourgeois' work to articulate their own pain, and in *Ana*, the atrocities associated with the protagonist's past lives are narrated through the medium of Medem's dead sister's paintings and Linda's (*mise-en-abîme*) video art. Adapting Ana Medem's (real-life) art to articulate the personal grief that drives this narrative, Medem goes some way to resurrecting the eponymous absent woman at the heart of this film. A parallel emerges between Medem's real and imaginary worlds, as he, the offscreen writer/director, and Ana, the onscreen artist, both try to make sense of the violence that surrounds through their work, by conjuring up the lost object.[113]

[113] 'Another analogy, due to Freud, emphasizes the fundamental point that the technique of hypnosis gave Charcot the freedom of intervention of an artist or a painter, on "material" fully surrendered to him. Hypnotic suggestion, writes Freud, is comparable to the art of painting, in the sense in which Leonardo

If, as MacDonald says, art hovers at the borders between the self and the other and operates as a mediator in sexual relations, what does this say about figures such as the *Venus de Milo* that recur and continue to resonate across the ages? This thesis begins with Buñuel's 1977 reference to the *Venus de Milo* and ends here, in 2007, with Medem's: *Ana*'s final sequence shows its heroine walking past Dine's ironically titled bronze sculptures, which are a roughly rendered (and multiplied) figurative quotation of the classical icon, albeit headless, that serves as a wry comment on the relationship between the object of desire – framed here as a famous version of the female nude, eternal recipient of the gaze – and the refusal to grant that object the gift of sight, the drive to render it unable to return the desiring look [Fig. 27].

Figure 27: The largest of three figures in *Looking Towards the Avenue*, Jim Dine (1989).

Dine's tripartite piece is situated on the corners of New York's 53rd Street and 52nd Street and Sixth Avenue. It consists of three oversized approximations of the famous classical sculpture mounted on hefty

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opposed it to sculpture: it works *per via di porre:* it deposits (like a painter *poses* his pigment), supplements, projects, glazes, frames' (Didi-Huberman 2003: 186).

polished black granite bases. The largest, on the corner of 53rd Street, is twenty-three feet high, and the smaller two on the other corner are identically mounted and stand at fourteen and eighteen feet respectively. Dine has been making sculptures and prints that are evocative of, but – importantly – not exact copies of the *Venus de Milo* since the 1970's, and in this particular ironic homage, Venus has been decapitated and multiplied, leaving her simultaneously monstrous and absurd.

The position of these headless effigies (and a caustic take, perhaps, on the three graces) in the midst of commercial New York contextualises them in a way that encourages us to question the relationship between the idealised female form caught and imprisoned within a particular frame, here that of Western Capitalism, except this time not only missing her arms, but further mutilated and manipulated, further commoditised (and exploited) by the (male) artist. Sixth Avenue is officially called Avenue of the Americas, evoking both the country's indigenous heritage and South and Central America as well, which creates a notable symmetry between Dine's Venuses and Osdad Ciaca, two archetypes that bookend the opposite ends of Ana's journey from idealised object of desire to integrated, powerful, and ultimately triumphant goddess. The verdigris surface of Dine's sculptures echo earlier shots of The Statue of Liberty, linking these two idealised representations of femininity, equally petrified by the patriarchal imaginary albeit serving different functions – in both cases the female form is used to represent an impossible ideal, whether that of physical perfection or ideological freedom.

In the final minutes of the film, footage of Ana in grey, metallic New York – emerging bleeding but triumphant from her beating by Mister Halcón – is spliced together with gold-tinted shots of her before her chaos was unleashed, interlacing her final incarnation as femme fatale/urban avenger with the idyllic scene of her naked on her Ibizan beach, hair still wild and dreadlocked, her back to the camera as she walks into the sea like Venus returning to the watery womb that created her. As we cut back

to Ana surrounded by a crowd on Sixth Avenue and over her shoulder Dine's two smaller sculptures are just visible, Vellés approaches the camera, bleeding from the nose and mouth but laughing until she is framed in close up so the shot pans with her as she continues walking forward. As her head passes the largest of Dine's sculptures the camera fixes on the base of this bronze Venus before tilting upward, until the headless figure is centre-screen and Ana is no longer in shot. The film's penultimate frame is of Dine's Venus-a-like framed on all sides by the metallic, vertical thrust of the surrounding skyscrapers, its rough and organic surface (evocative of thumb and finger marks left in clay by the sculptor) standing in stark contrast and evoking the similar textual opposition between the masculine and feminine elements of Bourgeois' *Janus Fleuri*.

The screen then fades to black and remains blank for several seconds before fading in to an image of Ana's naked body floating in the sea, shot from below, arms and legs gently oscillating with each soft wave, and then fading back to black. Bearing in mind that, according to Greek mythology, Aphrodite/Venus was not only born from the sea an adult woman, but its waters also eternally renewed her virginity, we can observe the striking contrast between Medem's penultimate shot of Dine's sculpture: a visibly imperfect, manmade interpretation of another ancient interpretation of female perfection, Venus herself, and the final image of the director's own interpretation of Venus, Ana, his composite figure, as she returns to the sea that can cleanse her entirely and restore her to virginity.

Conclusion: an abject act of poetry

Framed by two separate scatological acts and loosely structured as a palindrome, the narrative of *Ana* begins and ends with female bodies disobediently 'issuing filth' from their 'faltering outlines and broken surface' (Nead 1992: 7): both Ana and the dove represent feminine bodies mythically associated with peace, love, hope, survival and liberty, and both are presented as abject bodies that are punished for issuing filth (by literally defecating) with brutal violence that causes their outlines to 'falter' as they bleed from the broken surface of their battered skin.[114] On Ana's side, this 'filth' is portrayed as a product of maternity and erotic desire. The closing repetition of this excremental act, crucially, enables Medem to put forward a different and more positive outcome: the dove's fate was sealed by its accidental act of defiance against the falcon, but, by contrast, Ana's conscious 'poetic act' marks the start of her rebellion, both symbolically and practically.

By referencing so many different attempts to petrify and frame the female body – whether as Venus or Liberty, Osdad Ciaca or French mountaineer, artistic savage or avenging *femme fatale* – Medem's film demonstrates the many Ana's resistance to their containment. Focussing on the fragmentation of its female subject, *Ana* denies the 'mirror like identification with the unified self as subject' (Studlar 1985: 5) that the dominant male gaze has become accustomed to in cinema, instead presenting audiences with a chaotic and multiplied heroine/object of desire. The problematic flipside, however, is that this same fragmentation (albeit via the process of multiplication) also frames her as an object of desire in ways that uphold 'the patriarchal limitations on female representation in film' (Studlar 1985: 5). Unlike the aesthetic challenge staged by the hysterical and bisexual forms of Bourgeois' sculptures, for

[114] We are reminded of the elemental significance of shit: St. Augustine's *"We are born between faeces and urine" (Inter faeces et urinam nascimur)*. This film is 'born' between faeces, the arc of the narrative is itself excreted between these two scenes of excretion.

all that Medem's narrative attempts to challenge, in reality it continues to uphold, and adhere to, the traditional politics of the gaze.

The film's final sequence offers the viewer three contrasting visions of Woman: Ana as vanquishing femme fatale, bloody and defiant, full of life and in motion; an animated imitation of the *Venus de Milo*, not headless, armless, frozen, and capable only of receiving the gaze, and yet still, in the last analysis, a wistful fantasy of the ubiquitous (and faceless) female nude, shot from underneath, floating on the surface of a sea that may represent the breadth and depth of our cultural unconscious. Perhaps these three representations of woman do demonstrate the more profound implications of 'la lucha ancestral de la mujer' (Etxebeste Gómez 2010: 41) that Medem was so keen to explore – a fight that not only takes on the terrible physical violence still suffered by so many women at the hands of men, but that also squares up to the structural violence done by the fixed and regressive notions of femininity that continue to thrive in the patriarchal imaginary. Nonetheless, the ambivalence of the imagery used in this powerful denouement leaves this issue frustratingly unresolved.

Artist Mira Shor highlights the ease with which male artists appropriate feminist concepts, stating 'men can freely co-opt feminist ideas and forms, and can self-righteously search for and claim an anima… and get brownie points for trying' (1996: 59). Her implied reference to the Jungian concept of the anima may offer a clue as to why this film is (in spite of itself) retrogressive, and unable to escape gender bound and essentialist archetypes that were so profoundly deconstructed by second wave feminists. Pavlović writes that 'human bodies are not merely natural, biological entities; they are penetrated by culture through and through' (2003: 4), underlining why the representation of the human body remains so fraught with difficulties. As was suggested in the introduction to this chapter, *Ana* problematises this issue by highlighting the tension between the self-defined self and the self that is defined by historical and cultural context. In the context of the mid-2000's, when *Ana*

was made, the rigid, Dworkin-inflected feminism that Linda espouses seems naively essentialist and unsophisticated, but it is particularly grating now, in the present era of intersectionality and multiple fourth wave feminisms. Medem presents his audience with a central contradiction: his film draws attention to the fundamental, and damaging gender inequality that still exists, while simultaneously (perhaps unconsciously) reproducing the same retrogressive divisions. As Sonn points out, 'male anarchists maintained that it was both possible and necessary for women to emancipate themselves, yet they affirmed sexual differences that made gender equality appear unlikely if not impossible' (2010: 33).

This quotation echoes the paradox of *Ana*: a film that aims to celebrate all that is not only feminine, but also feminist, while simultaneously affirming essentialist gender tropes. Although the eponymous protagonist's journey moves from representing her as the passive object of a controlling look to the object of desire that looks back, exploits her own objectification (by dressing as 'Mia'), then literally shits on the traditional bearer of the look, polluting and obscuring his vision, the overall trajectory of this narrative appears to remain unaware of the symbolic order that confines it. As a result, the message is confused and contradictory (chaotic, even). Ana is 'born' like the archetypal Venus, from the waves, and ends up expelling her message in a perverse, auto-productive birth. Here, the traditional cycle according to which a female archetype might be completed by reproduction, is altered by an autonomous act of production that requires no fertilization by a masculine element, and yet, albeit this appears to imply female autonomous revenge, it also conflates awkwardly with the masculine fear that lies at the heart of Creed's concepts of feminine monstrosity.

Medem's insistence on the connection between women and animals is problematic.[115] Ana-as-dove appears as a symbol of hope emerging from grief, an incarnation of Noah's messenger bringing good news after the devastating flood. Ana is that dove reborn, both the hope at the bottom of Pandora's box and the box itself. In this context, perhaps it is precisely the allegorical function of Medem's bird imagery that does sit uncomfortably – there is, after all, nothing allegorical about the violence meted out on women's bodies on and off screen. There is something in the distillation of the feminine into animals – associated with base instincts and physical drives and functions as opposed to the lofty ideals of philosophical thought associated with the mind (the Apollonian versus the Dionysian) – that has to do with a simultaneous deification and reduction that fails to challenge the representational status quo in any meaningful way.[116] Perhaps, even, Medem himself feels that the reappropriation of the 'fucking bird' of the film's prologue is not quite his to marshal?

Grief and desire are extreme yet productive states driven by the impulse to recapture the lost object via its representation and, in this film, Art is presented as the midpoint between empirical history and subjective internal life that draws the viewer into the realm of the mystical and magical real. Through narrative excess, *Ana* explores the difficult simultaneity of the maternal/sexual woman, the weight of the contradictory archetypes that still haunt representations of woman and bends her body into the hysterical arch. Far from perfect, and even perhaps unconsciously, *Ana* remains a captivating piece of cinema

[115] In relation to the squirrels in *La ardilla*, Medem defends the metaphor as an example of how women end up having to behave 'para librarse de una situación machista' (Angulo and Rebordinos 2004: 211).

[116] 'Mainstream film coded the erotic into the language of the dominant patriarchal order' (Mulvey 1999: 834) – Medem's cinema certainly does not qualify as mainstream (by which Mulvey means Hollywood) but, nevertheless, underneath it all is governed by the same structural dynamic of masculine gaze and woman as its subject: as Mulvey explains , 'psychoanalytic theory is thus appropriate here as a political weapon, demonstrating the way the unconscious of patriarchal society has structured film form' (1999: 833).

because of the way it problematises hysterical female bodies, displaying them from within the lawless territory of grief and desire. Sex and violence are intertwined in this film that is also an homage to a literally absent woman, Ana Medem, a lost object uncomfortably 'regained' in the context of this sexually driven narrative. Ana is an unstable (chaotic) signifier, made less stable still by the mutilating force of a desire that driven by both sex and grief. The emphasis on movement versus stasis – static statues versus Ana the wandering womb – echoes the contrast between woman as a verb and as a noun (MacCormack 2003: 34), woman as a slippery and ungraspable concept, rather than frozen subjugated symbol.

Hysteria produces convulsive movement (and the arching of the hysterical body), so the opposite of hysteria is an impossible illusion, or at the very least a crushing repression. By presenting hypnosis as the only tool that can open Ana's metaphorical Pandora's box (containing centuries of violence against women), this film's narrative reinforces Freud's association of hypnosis with violence, in turn confirming representations of the female body as, like the infamous box, a beautiful but treacherous container (we are reminded of Didi-Huberman's comment about hypnosis as 'between charm and cruelty' (2003: 233)). Mulvey writes:

> Feminist film theory has argued that cinema finds, not its only, but its most perfect, fetishistic object in the image of woman. As a signifier of sexuality, the image of eroticised femininity once again has a bridging function (1996: 13).

Bridging here may be taken literally, in that the hysterical arch is a 'bridge' position that both physically and symbolically articulates *jouissance,* and a painful response to repression, something that occurs in the shape of this arch that traces the trajectory between pleasure and pain. In the context of this argument, the eroticised female body displayed in a hysterical *arc en cercle* may read as a bridge between the director and his own hysteria, displayed via a surrogate body.

Ana problematises the oppositional relationship between a masculine history and feminine 'hystory', partly driven by the director's desire to fill absent spaces – both the absence of his sister and the absence in a much broader sense created by the lack that is woman in the Lacanian construction of woman as lack. Medem attempts to fill the gaps in history by representing the 'missing' women, who have slipped beneath the levels of cultural consciousness. Film narrative is offered up as a bridge to these lost 'memories', but it is one that also falls into the traps laid by the dominant symbolic order according to which feminine archetypes filter into and command our preconception of femininity. Medem (in the guise of a contemporary Charcot) frames these hysterical females and presents them as objects of curiosity and performance – with a view (also like Charcot) to their liberation that nonetheless propagates the damaging myths of femininity that restrict and cause both the symptoms and the performance. Writing long before *Ana* was made, Sánchez observes:

> Medem can't seem to escape the paradigm of 'his paradoxical representation of women as modern independent subjects who are, however, still deeply attached to the traditional values imposed by men and male violence' (Sánchez 1997: 160).

Ten years later, when *Ana* is filmed, the director remains stuck in the same rut. But does this film offer insight into the source, rather than just the symptoms of hysteria? Does it attempt to understand our complex twofold response towards and away from archetypes of female monstrosity, to present subjective hystory versus objective history?

In this narrative, hypnosis enables Ana and the spectator to look with a gaze that defies chronology. Walusinski lists the psychiatric terms used by psychiatrists to describe the behaviours of hysterics: 'hysterical psychosis, hallucinations, melancholy, erotic delirium, etc.' (2014: 76). The arc of *Ana*'s narrative enacts this erotic delirium instigated by the object of desire; over the course of the film Ana cycles through

hallucinations, melancholy, and psychosis, the hysterical symptoms Walusinski describes. She journeys from her initial presentation as a classic example of the female nude – virginal, passive, idealised, Venus – to her eventual role as an embodiment of female abjection, in possession of all the subversive potency that comes with it. At its crudest, Medem's film suggests the extremes of scatology and poetry as our best weapons against the exhausting struggle for dominance between masculine and feminine, playfully but insistently underlining the need to step into a register that is more abstract and symbolic if we are to find a solution to a seemingly eternal conflict.[117] In spite of its failings, the magnetism of its hysterical drive remains captivating, a 'perversely appealing' (Creed 1993: 31) exploration of supposed female monstrosity, the wandering womb with an 'abismo adentro'. The chaos of 'hysterical Ana' lies in the fact she is simultaneously present and absent, individual and archetype, homage and replica, an excessive representation of unconsciously collective, or collectively unconscious expectations of and fears of femininity (as goddess/virgin/mother/monstrous femme fatale) that serves to both screen (display) and screen (hide) male hysteria, grief, and fear – as lost object, object of desire, and object of medical curiosity, she simultaneously represents the disavowal of and articulation of the hysteria of Medem himself.

[117] Bataille on poetry: 'poetry leads to the same place as all forms of eroticism – to the blending and fusion of separate objects. It leads us to eternity, it leads us to death, and through death to continuity. Poetry is eternity; the sun matched with the sea' (Bataille 2006: 25). Building on the Derridian idea that excrement is actually the product of our assimilation/consumption of history, poetry and shit can be seen as the same end product of consuming, condensing, and understanding reality.

Figure 28: One of Ana Medem's paintings, on display at Chez Justine.

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Conclusion: Bodies Without Organs

> Sometimes the hysteric is fatal, a *femme fatale*, to her physician; sometimes she captivates him (Didi-Huberman 2003: 169).

Over the course of this analysis, the female object of desire has emerged as a polyvalent cipher laden with time-honoured archetypes and expectations. In spite of her shape-shifting capabilities, certain attributes have been petrified like the marble that variously depicts her. The apparent changes to her surface are largely cosmetic: underneath she remains stubbornly ossified as variously passive or monstrous, and viewed only in relation to her masculine counterpart. Each of the films in this study present their female protagonists as excessive: vessels filled with a combination of impossible desires and deep-seated fears attached to the feminine. We have shown how, in these three films, the representation of these female (-coded) *objets a* channels masculine hysteria, which is then enacted onscreen by the female body in such a way that it articulates and disavows the masculine hysteria in question.

It is important to reiterate that 'woman' and the female nude are not equal to one another. Rather, the female nude is a part of 'woman', one of many fragments that make up the whole (or hole). Nead describes the transformation of the female body into the female nude as 'an act of regulation' (1992: 6), a way of fixing at least part of the disobedient chaos that 'woman' represents in a symbolic order defined by patriarchy. Culturally, the desire to regulate the female sexual body remains as strong as ever, but what is interesting about the three films in this study is that they each represent a fundamental failure to do so. If, as Nead argues, the successful containment of the female nude 'sets in place specific norms of viewing and viewers' that work to 'reinforce the unity and integrity of the viewing subject' (1992: 2), then these films resolutely fail. Rather, they expose the crisis of a fractured perspective that can no longer contain the feminine chaos it fears. The bodily transgression (of the feminine) represented in all three films can be interpreted as

symptomatic of the hysterical disintegration of the masculine authorial voice. In each case this desire seems to oscillate between two positions: the need to possess the unruly feminine body enacted onscreen by a male protagonist, and the uncontrollable urge to deconstruct it and expose its multiplicity on the part of the writer/director. If we return to Nead's description of the female body as 'a container for both the ideal and the polluted' (1992: 8), in each case here, this container is cracked, and both representational extremes leak out. As the revelation that *Cet obscur objet*'s mysterious sack contains white lace stained with blood might suggest, the femininity projected onscreen is both pure and monstrous.[1]

MacCormack suggests the answer to the vexed question, "what is woman?" is:

> The depressing and pessimistic response that all women are is shared oppression. Shared oppression, like power in masculinity, is a matter of degree. All subjects share forces of both, complicating the dualism of oppressor and oppressed, of power and resistance (2008: 33).

In the context of these films, the dichotomy between the two extremes of female representation – ideal and polluted – splits along the same lines as the dichotomies MacCormack highlights: it is the oscillation between the two that in part constitutes the disobedience that complicates the power dynamic between male and female protagonist. For example: even if Conchita is no more than his projection, Mathieu is nevertheless a slave to his own desire; the complex amalgam of desires that Ledgard projects onto Vera ensure the blindness that ultimately makes him vulnerable enough for he/r to usurp his power; Ana is seemingly a celebration of forgotten oppressed women united by oppression and tragic destiny (their miserable fates), but, as the film narrative increasingly depicts her as a

[1] Disregarding, of course, Buñuel's numerous assertions that he was vehemently against any suggestion that his films were deliberately symbolic. Wood notes that the director lamented this final scene, considering it in retrospect to be too symbolic (Wood 2000: 2)

collective figure (a goddess, even) symbolic of this shared fate, it also, ultimately, re-frames her as a female nude – completing what purports to be her salvation with a return to the static/fragmented iconography of the nude. Venus, after all, embodies both poles: she is a goddess, with all the power that mythical status implies, but she is at the same time an exemplary object of the gaze and the classical archetype of regulated femininity.

Following Deleuze and Guattari's assertion that writing 'has to do with surveying, mapping' (2004: 5), we may understand these three films as a 'plane of consistency', an assemblage of three filmic texts selected so they may be mapped with a particular focus.[2] This thesis has sought to map the female object of desire as it is presented in the works studied here, focussing attention on the evolution of this female object across these narratives, embracing Deleuze and Guattari's nomadism and its aims to 'keep moving, even in place, never stop moving, motionless voyage, desubjectification' (2004: 177). This analysis has followed the movement of, variously: Mathieu's locomotive desire (represented onscreen both figuratively and literally, in the train motif); Vera's external stasis and internal journey, he/r enforced movement from one sexed identity to another, eventually transgressing the gender binary; Ana's quest that is both global and psychological, a journey far and wide simultaneously backwards in time and outwards geographically. Deconstructing the boundaries between these films has unravelled a narrative of desire that reaches across these divides following Deleuze and Guattari's direction to 'connect, conjugate, continue' (2004: 178).

Now that each has been deconstructed separately, let us once again take up the role of Deleuze and Guattari's nomad thinker, and 'walk' a path through these films in order to understand the implications of

[2] 'Write, form a rhizome, increase your territory by deterritorialization, extend the line of flight to the point where it becomes an abstract machine covering the entire plane of consistency' (Deleuze and Guattari 2004: 12). *Move this to intro to state territory? That the films are being 'deterritorialized' and reconjoined on the plane of consistency that is feminine absence?*

this study. We may view Conchita, Vera, and Ana as shells that are variously filled up with and emptied of concepts that flow from one text to the next. They are animated in turn by the gaze (both onscreen and off), just as Charcot's gaze animated his hysterics. Patients at the Salpêtrière performed a series of attitudes understood to signify their hysterical condition, and these female protagonists similarly perform a series of feminine ideals and archetypes that signify their role as objects of desire. J. Evans notes that, in visual studies, 'Gutiérrez-Albilla highlights the role of the body as "document" in the transmission of memory and history from the body of one viewer, or participant, to the next' (2015: 328). Let us look at the way these 'body documents' manage to communicate across a feminine void, as *objets a* that stand for both textual and sexual desires.

Cet obscur objet introduced the first of these (coded) female objects of desire: Conchita, full name Concepción, her two names suggestive of the duality Mathieu is blind to, but that the viewer knows she embodies. Her name encourages allusions to Venus, miraculously born on the shell 'Conchita' evokes. Like the many representations of this goddess throughout the history of art, Buñuel's Venus has more than one face: Molina and Bouquet take turns onscreen to embody a shape-shifting projection from Mathieu's unconscious that passes as 'woman', pushing the dance of desire to its outer limits until it eventually (literally) explodes the frame.

Next, Almodóvar dissolves the forty-one year gap between Buñuel's film and his own in a single shot that functions like a palimpsest through which we can still read his predecessor's opening scene. The world depicted in *La piel* is an uncanny double to ours, not an exact copy but a glossy tracing laid over both the past and our contemporary present. It is here that the next shape-shifting female protagonist is made and not born. We move from Buñuel's impossible shell with her silent fecundity (Concepción) and unacknowledged duality, to a form of conception that is a clear violation: Almodóvar's surgically enhanced

Venus, the focal point of a much more active critique of gaze theory and its inherent power struggle. Where Buñuel mischievously shows without comment, Almodóvar assaults his viewer polemically and unequivocally. Conchita the shell delivers us Vera as a perverse Venus, who not only transitions from masculine to feminine but also from victim to perpetrator of violence.

In the opening sequence of Medem's *Ana*, Venus reappears, but amnesiac of the violence she has suffered. She returns to the sea to become 're-virginated', emerging purified once more and ready for battle: in what this film represents as a fight to the almost-death with the archetypal White Man of war. Dove against falcon, hope against hunter, Medem's hysterical heroine embodies an ancestral connection with all women as the victims of an oppression that is both structural and physical. After multiple batterings, his chaotic heroine emerges triumphant, holding the pregnant history of gender-based violence within her, suggesting an interpretation of 'woman' that tallies with MacCormack's assertion (quoted above) that the essence of the female is shared oppression (2008: 33).

Ana represents a contemporary hysterical patient while also embodying the ancient diagnosis of the travelling hysterical womb. At the end of her journey, she appears, momentarily, like the dove in the opening sequence, to be a figure of hope. Dine's giant, decapitated interpretations of the *Venus de Milo* (anonymous replicas of the ultimate *objet d'art*) are shown here as a figure mutilated by so many years as the object of a violating male gaze. Walking away from the statues, Ana embodies a representation of the abject female body as a figure of power and resistance. The obscene act that so nearly finishes this compiled trilogy of hysterical desire presents 'woman' harnessing her abjection and embracing the (self-identified) poetry in the unruly potential of her body to disobey. In this moment, she disregards the frame enforced upon her by a masculine symbolic order that clips the wings that should represent a path to freedom, a literal 'line of flight' (to coin Deleuze and Guattari's

term). The power of this disregard for traditional rules of engagement between object and subject of the gaze is, however, undermined by the film's final shot: its closing image is a regression back to Ana as island-dwelling Venus, shot from below, floating in the sea. The image once again frames the feminine body 'behaving itself' as the passive recipient of a gaze that, whether consciously or not, appears to mediate the fear of unruly women that lies at the heart of the same patriarchal symbolic order that, elsewhere, this film narrative has so carefully striven to undermine. In this final shot, Ana is once again a passive Venus, a floating object free from agency or desires of her own [Fig. 1].

Figure 1: The final shot of *Caótica Ana.*

And so, the cycle is complete: from two bodies for one figure (Conchita the unstable shell), to the ultimate visual shape-shift (from masculine victim to feminine victor), and finally, Ana, the largest Matryoshka doll. Floating in the feminine archetype that engenders all others, Ana's unruly femininity is literally contained by her symbolic association with the sea as origin of life/womb. Each film allows the viewer mastery of their gaze at least momentarily, before shattering this illusion by displaying the unruly disobedience of the onscreen feminine,

who permanently eludes the spectator's (and the director's?) onscreen surrogate: ultimately, Mathieu's gaze is impotent, Legard's voyeurism is punished by death, and Halcón's desire for sexual and political dominance is usurped by an abject act of poetry.

But what if women owned the gaze? This question is why Bourgeois' work provides such an important counterpoint to this study. On the restrictive and socially endorsed compulsion to frame femininity, Nead writes:

> Woman looks at herself in the mirror; her identity is framed by the abundance of images that define femininity. She is framed – experiences herself as image or representation – by the edges of the mirror and then judges the boundaries of her own form and carries out any necessary self-regulation (1992: 11).

Three of the Bourgeois sculptures we have encountered in this thesis, *Janus Fleuri, Fillette*, and *The Arch of Hysteria*, are figures that hang suspended in space, unframed and gloriously unregulated. They are metaphorical reflections exposing an inner chaos that is not presented as negative or frightening. Instead, Bourgeois unleashes these composite bodies into the world, embracing 'the formless matter of the female body' and rejecting the 'boundaries, conventions and poses' (Nead 1992: 11) that have conventionally tried to contain it throughout the history of art. Rather than fearing it, Bourgeois celebrates its polymorphous perversity. The artist herself states, 'my art is a reconstruction of myself' (Macfarlane and Doyle 2014: 6), and it is through this auto-representation/self-portraiture that her work avoids the voyeuristic gaze. As Kate Macfarlane explains, becoming the object of one's own gaze creates a very different dynamic from the norm of active masculine subject/passive feminine object (Macfarlane and Doyle 2014: 10). The body in the hysterical arch experiences the *jouissance* of the *arc-en-cercle*, speaking in Irigaray's Mother Tongue, a physical language that momentarily escapes the restrictions of the symbolic order.

Let us return again to Irigaray's proposition that 'woman's desire would not be expected to speak the same language as man's' (1985: 25). Bourgeois' figures do not speak the same visual language as Conchita, Vera, and Ana. But does their tactile, embodied physicality speak more directly to female desire? MacCormack writes that 'woman in cinema is taken as fetish (a part that stand [sic] for a whole) or object for male desire' (2008: 33).[3] Does the change in medium open up more space for deviation? As Mulvey states, films are themselves commodities that put commodities on display (1996: 8), vastly expensive collaborations that must ensure good returns in financial economy (whether classified as 'art films' or not). The female protagonists of these films are bound to the symbolic because, although also visual, they speak in words that are weighted against them. They are objects of the gaze presented and interpreted by male directors. Sculpture, on the other hand, enables Bourgeois' figures to bypass the symbolic altogether, offering up silence as a form of resistance.[4] The fact that the bisexuality of Bourgeois' work (and, to reiterate the point made in chapter three, I am using this word to refer to the simultaneous presence of both genders rather than to sexual orientation) reads in any way as subversive stands as a reminder that even with awareness and power, 'woman' is still configured within a symbolic order that continues to privilege the masculine perspective.

Psychoanalysis enabled Bourgeois to embrace her own hysteria and 'to make a story of hysteria itself, which then became an object for her art' (Mitchell 2014: 11). As we have established, Charcot did study male hysteria, but the photographs in the *Iconographie* are all of female patients, emphasising the uncomfortable coexistence of different desires at play in the medical gaze. Bourgeois does not tell the story of the

[3] 'Women in film thus do not function as signifiers for a signified (a real woman), as sociological critics have assumed, but signifier and signified have been elided into a sign that represents something in the male unconscious' (Kaplan 1983: 30).

[4] This is not to suggest that Bourgeois' sculptures are not also commodities bound to commerce and trade, but the fact of her very late fame underlines the process of her work not being for commercial ends, and they are art objects designed with a very different function.

hysteric as a female archetype, like Charcot, but of hysteria itself, which she explores from both within and without, both as doctor/director and as patient.[5] She offers figures that represent a silenced feminine 'hystory' that can fill the holes left in the script of a dominant ideology that configures 'woman' as mysterious absence. Her power 'lies not in confession but in a visual vocabulary of ambiguity, an ambiguity so potent, it becomes suspense' (Hustvedt 2016: 29).

Showalter emphasises the performative element at play in hysteria's documentation, writing: 'the performances took place in a hall of mirrors, for the hysterics were coached and surrounded by pictures of *grande hystérie*' (1997: 36). Vera and Ana join these ranks, their bent back bodies imitating the same principles as the women at the Salpêtrière, and so the hysterical body itself becomes a document that reads the same way centuries later, regardless of context. The cinema screen is one of the mirrors in this endlessly reflecting hall that displays monstrous double after monstrous double of idealised femininity, providing another frame with which to fix her in place. We have seen how, in quoting an icon of classical femininity, the *Venus de Milo*, Buñuel's *Cet obscur objet* explores the fascination of idealised femininity as an impossible desire. Via this film, we have traced a pathway to Bourgeois and her sculptural investigations of the hysterical arch in order to illustrate the extent to which clichéd representations of women replicate persistent archetypal projections that can be related to male hysteria, and to ask questions about the suppressed discourse of female desire. We have established that Bourgeois' work reclaims and fills this absence with pieces such as *Janus Fleuri*, which represents a feminine form emerging from masculinity thrown into crisis. In our discussion of Almodóvar's *La piel*, we have seen how the surface of a body can contradict what lies beneath; how the corporeal can be forcibly wrenched from the essence of self, creating a seemingly unbreachable gulf between the signifier and the

[5] 'The vulgarized image of hysteria was the one produced and proposed by Charcot' (Didi-Huberman 2003: 235).

signified. Venus resurfaces here, as Titian's two Venuses (Urbino and Music) are referenced directly in the set, and the echoes between the painter and Almodóvar's crazed plastic surgeon are clear in the quest of both to capture the ideal in feminine beauty. In the context of these other works, we can interpret Ana as an extension of this mysterious feminine that materialises, framed in the arched hysterical space, traced as an expression of masculinity in great distress. According to Lebeau, the treatment of hysteria involved 'an obliteration of privacy that casts the hysteric in the role of the grotesque' (2006: 18). The hysterical body is an obscene body. It is uncontained, transgressive, a body that disrupts and disturbs instead of 'bringing about stillness and wholeness' (Nead 1992: 2), as the framed female nude is designed to do.

Bourgeois' work provides an alternative vision that encourages ambiguity, bodies that 'deterritorialize' the gaze and are bisexual, suspended between states, in constant motion between binaries. They are not surrogate bodies for her hysteria but direct embodiments of it, described from within not framed from without. A comparison of the *Venus de Milo* and Bourgeois' fabric *Arch of Hysteria* (2004) illustrates these opposing responses to the hysterical condition [Fig. 2]. The first, a rigid pacification of castration anxiety, where the spectator is protected from the 'horror of nothing to see' by a carefully positioned swathe of fabric, the peaceful expression on Venus' face suggesting a resigned complicity with her role as a static object of desire; the second, an unruly figure suspended in space, its striped fabric evoking mattresses and sheets, its bulges tactile and its presence oblivious, turned in on itself, perhaps still inevitably ensnared by, yet also sublimely impervious to the same patriarchal symbolic that, as we have argued, continues to plague and to confine the representation of Conchita, Vera, and Ana.

Figure 2: *Arch of Hysteria*, Louise Bourgeois (2004).

FILMOGRAPHY

Une oeuvre à repriser (Luc Lagier, Studio Canal, 2005)

Cet obscur objet du désir (Luis Buñuel, 1977)

La piel que habito (Pedro Almodóvar, 2011)

Caótica Ana (Julio Medem, 2007)

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